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THE APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE

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LEIPZIG NEW YORK TORONTO
MELBOURNE CAPETOWN BOMBAY
CALCUTTA MADRAS SHANGHAI
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THE APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE

BY

J. W. MACKAIL

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The Lord Northcliffe Lectures
in Literature
UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON
1930

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS, OXFORD
BY JOHN JOHNSON, PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

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I

THE PATHWAYS OF APPROACH

WITH SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON DRAMA AS LITERATURE

THIS lectureship is expressly described as a lectureship in literature. It may seem sufficiently obvious that the subject I have chosen falls within this sphere, is indeed central in it. Yet if one thinks a little more closely, it becomes clear that a large part of the modern study of Shakespeare does not deal with the body of his work as literature. There is a real danger that concentration on origins, on textual criticism, on details of political and social history, on the mechanism and conditions of the Elizabethan stage, and on the problems of modern stage-production, may confuse or even partially sterilize appreciation of Shakespeare as a creative artist, of his supremacy as a master of prose and verse. It may insensibly lead to treating Shakespearian drama as a manufactured article and not as a live organism. It was both; but the latter is what gives it its value. The approach to Shakespeare may be made in many ways. What is essential is that it should be a vital approach, not an exploration of side issues, and not a centrifugal movement through a maze of multiplying bypaths. Its object is to know Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was an artist; his work is art. One first principle towards true appreciation of any work of art or any body of such work is, that what matters is not what the artist made it out of, but what he made it into. 'Poems', Professor Grierson observes

with incisive truth, 'are not written by influences or movements or sources': and this truth holds good of dramas no less than of poems. The artist is of course in some sense the creature of his age, the product of his environment. But exploration of environment and origins is not only endless, it is distracting; it leads and lures in all directions away from the centre, and to lead everywhere is to lead nowhere. It is even positively harmful when, as sometimes happens with analysis, 'we murder to dissect'. In the grim words of the Duke to Claudio in *Measure for Measure*, the upshot of such analysis of Shakespeare is

> Thou art not thyself;
> For thou exist'st on many a thousand grains
> That issue out of dust.

Dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return.

Against such misapplication of minute analytic study, as against the other danger of losing Shakespeare in his environment, stage-production, the revivification of his plays as live works of art, is an invaluable safeguard. But even this other fundamental fact, on which stress is now so largely and so justly laid, that his plays were designed for the stage, not for the study, that they are dramas, things acted, not literature, writings to be read, is so far from being the whole truth that it also may be gravely misused. The MSS. from which single plays were printed in Shakespeare's lifetime, and from which years after his death the Shakespeare Canon was put together and published, were doubtless in their primary intention mere *aides-mémoire*, through which the words of action were transmitted to and memor-

ized by the actors. But they were also from the first, and remain, literature. In the First Folio and in its innumerable successors, the dramas, the acted representations of life, to use a famous phrase, 'put off flesh and blood, and assumed immortality'. To reclothe them in their original flesh and blood is impossible. To reclothe them in the flesh and blood of living actors on a modern stage is a high aim and a fascinating occupation. It is universally recognized —indeed it is self-evident—that to read about action is no substitute for seeing action. That was a truism in the time of Horace, and long before. But in so far as the language which conveys the action, which gives it meaning, is literature, it must be treated as literature: it must be read and studied as a book. Such a book, while it is not flesh and blood, is in a very real sense alive. It is, in Milton's well-known words, 'the precious life-blood of a master-spirit embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life'. It is of 'a good book' that Milton says this. Shakespeare is a good book.

The subject of these lectures is the approach to Shakespeare, not the vast and multiform sphere of studies which that approach opens out. I do not propose in them to deal with, or even to touch upon except cursorily, any of those fields of Shakespearian criticism or research which have risen into such remarkable prominence in recent years. They bulk largely both in the sphere of letters and in the province of education. They present a continually accumulating mass of problems, many of great interest, some which have led to keen, not to say acrimonious, contention. A generation ago it might have been

thought, indeed it was, that Shakespearian study was exhausted. Nothing short of a revolution has since taken place. New lines of criticism, new methods of analysis, new fields of inquiry have multiplied. The names of Professor Dover Wilson, Sir Edmund Chambers, Dr. W. W. Greg, Mr. Granville-Barker, are only a few of the more eminent, in this country alone, in a list which might be expanded indefinitely. We know much more about the historical and cultural environment in which Shakespeare lived and in which the works passing under his name were produced. The Elizabethan stage, and all that that phrase in its widest sense implies, has taken fresh life. The immense place taken by the theatrical art in modern education, culture, and habits has reacted in all directions upon appreciation of that past age, of the Elizabethan drama, of Shakespeare himself. As with the Bible, the volume we call Shakespeare is recognized as a collection, not indeed indiscriminate, but mixed and imperfect, brought together under a series of conventions. Survey and study of it leads us over the whole field in which, for more than twenty years, Shakespeare moved during his connexion with the London theatres as actor, playwright, or manager; as the central and to some extent still the enigmatic figure in a world of creative production and organized industry. Of Shakespeare himself as an individual we know little. He merged himself in his work. He would seem to have been contented with such recognition as he found in his lifetime, and to have had little or no care for posthumous fame. Except for the Sonnets—and all the inferences that have been or may be drawn from the Sonnets are

largely arbitrary and wholly precarious—there is hardly anything in his extant work from which conclusions can be safely drawn with regard either to the circumstances of his life, to his religious or political opinions, or to his own principles or predilections. The idolatry of the earlier nineteenth century erected him into something supernaturally inspired and 'myriad-minded'. Reaction against that fallacy tended to disintegrate him and leave him, like Homer, a name rather than a person. But after microscopic analysis and destructive criticism have done their utmost, Shakespeare remains; and the Shakespeare Canon remains as the secular Bible of the English-speaking world.

A large survey—it need not, because it is large, be superficial—is more than ever desirable now; and it is more than ever practicable if the approach is made with intelligence, imagination, and common sense. If we ask ourselves what is the best way of approaching Shakespeare, the answer perhaps is that the best way is the simplest: to read Shakespeare, to abandon ourselves to the fascination of the world which he opens out to us. It is impossible to read Shakespeare too much. It is easy, and common, to read too much about him. It is futile, or dangerous, or both, to try to read into him. Only after we have familiarized ourselves with the whole body of the plays and made ourselves denizens of the Shakespearian world, has the time or the need come to proceed to more critical, more scholarly, and no doubt more intelligent study. To plunge into that world, no introduction is necessary. It is still to us, as it was to our less overburdened predecessors,

> A wilderness of sweets, for nature here
> Wanton'd as in her prime, and play'd at will
> Her virgin fancies, pouring forth more sweet,
> Wild above rule or art, enormous bliss.

No one has begun to understand, is even in the way to understand, Shakespeare fully who has not read, re-read, and assimilated the plays as a whole, as a single body of work.

For this purpose, the artificial and often indefensible order in which from the Folio of 1623 onwards they have normally been printed, does not matter, nor does it matter in the least in what order they are read. They are at this stage a wilderness like Milton's Eden; but a wilderness up and down in which we may stray endlessly, until we can say of it, to use Milton's words again,

> I know each lane, and every alley green,
> Dingle, or bushy dell of this wild wood,
> And every bosky bourn from side to side,
> My daily walks and ancient neighbourhood.

Such acquaintance, such familiarity with Shakespeare is the initial pathway, the prelude to approach. That acquaintance made, that familiarity secured, the study of Shakespeare in a fuller sense begins.

There are numberless paths of this further approach, and ways of pursuing them. None can be prescribed, none pressed to the exclusion of others. The study is as multiform and inexhaustible as it is enthralling. But one caution may be given: to remember that for purposes of reading and study, no less than for purposes of stage-production, the plays must be regarded as organisms, as dramatic

wholes: it is their dramatic quality and effect which matters. The more simply and whole-heartedly we accept them as such, neither as more nor as less, the nearer we shall come to placing ourselves at a central position in which we are secure. Then we can turn, from that centre, to what has been written about Shakespeare in the way of commenting, introducing, appraising, analysing, tracing origins, rejecting or attributing, elucidating or obscuring. Not until we have soaked ourselves in them and pretty well know them by heart is it desirable to enter on the maze of problems which have long been, and continue to be, a playground for speculation, and for erection of innumerable collapsible card-houses.

To read Shakespeare then; to read largely, deeply, freely, incessantly; to read in a receptive, not a critical attitude, taking the impression of Shakespeare's world, not bringing our own impressions to it; that is the first, and in a sense also the last word. That is the first thing with which to begin; and we may find it after many years the last thing to which we return.

But here it may be said, Surely it is of equal, or even of prior importance, as a method of preliminary approach, to see and hear the plays acted? This is what they were written for. Shakespeare never published one of them. He never, so far as we can see, took the least concern in the issue of those which in a more or less imperfect form—often grossly imperfect—were printed during his own lifetime.

May it then be reasonably urged that the important thing, now as then, is not to read Shakespeare's plays, but to see and hear them acted? This is a half-truth.

It is far from being the whole truth. No doubt the practice—it may be said to have begun with the publication of the First Folio, and to have extended since over the whole world—of reading the plays instead of seeing and hearing them performed, of making the study not only supplement but supersede the theatre, is responsible for some harm as well as much good. It is responsible in particular for that endless dissection, searching for conjectural origins and parcelling out authorship of plays or scenes, which in the hands of modern scholars has rent the Canon into tatters. What matters, in Homer, is the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, not the material out of which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were constructed. What matters, in Shakespeare, is *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet* and *Cymbeline*, not what in these and in other plays was taken over from earlier pieces by other dramatists, or what was remodelled by Shakespeare from those or from his own prior drafts, or what may be of joint authorship, with Greene and Marlowe in the earlier, with Chapman in the middle, with Fletcher and Massinger in the later period. What he touched he Shakespearianized. What he gives us is not a congeries of fragments and tatters and patchwork; it is Shakespeare. And modern scholarship is gradually returning, after long circuits, to uphold, with a few defined exceptions, the essential authenticity of the Canon. We are no longer faced with the menace of a universe slowly but inexorably dissolving into radiation.

Now, these complicated and often rather futile problems do not force themselves on us, they hardly arise even in mere suggestion, when we see the plays

acted, i.e. when we take Shakespeare's work as he planned it and meant it to be taken. And its dramatic quality, needless to say, can hardly be grasped by mere reading. The dramatic structure and movement can only be very imperfectly apprehended at second hand; unacted action comes rather near to being a contradiction in terms. From any faithful stage-production these become visible in quite a new way. We realize what a master of stage-craft Shakespeare was, and how to stage-craft, to action, which is what stage-craft embodies, everything else in him is subordinated.

But stage-productions are infrequent, often incompetent, and usually mutilated. In this last respect there has been great improvement of late years. The Old Vic has set a standard. Even there, it is but partially attained. An uncut *Hamlet* has only been produced once or twice a year; an uncut *Antony and Cleopatra*, I think, never. To those who have seen those plays there, it is needless to say that the complete *Hamlet* and the fairly complete *Antony and Cleopatra* are in each case a new world. Equally is it true that plays which have been neglected or depreciated, and hardly even produced at all, are transfigured when actually presented. What reads languidly or inconsequently or distastefully is found to act quite effectively. Shakespeare was often careless. Sometimes he was quite reckless. In the conditions under which he worked he was necessarily hasty. But he knew his art, the art of the dramatic author and producer, thoroughly. Only when, now and then, he forgets to be a dramatist and becomes an essayist or a rhetorician, does his stage-action flag;

and such occasional relief from, or suspension of, action was part of the recognized technique of the theatre, and was welcomed by audiences who from the stage as from the pulpit expected both discussions and flights of rhetoric. The concluding scenes of *Macbeth*, huddled up and jerky on the printed page, are quite effective in the theatre. The same is probably true of the concluding scenes of *Troilus and Cressida* if rapidly acted. Inconsistencies which give pain to critical students are blotted out on the stage, are never thought of. Still when all is said it remains and must remain true that reading Shakespeare is what we have mostly, and for daily use and enjoyment wholly, to fall back upon. The one thing is a rare luxury; the other may be made a daily and delightful occupation. To make any large acquaintance with Shakespeare from the theatre alone is barely possible. To make complete acquaintance with him is not possible at all. How little, beyond the immediate impression, remains with us from a single performance of a Shakespearian play! Nobody would claim that he knew Shakespeare, as a book, by having read the plays once—or twice, or twenty times. What chance is there of our seeing any one of them, still less all of them, acted often enough to fix it in our minds, to become possessed of it? Life is not long enough for that. But what can be gained from reading Shakespeare constantly is endless.

And, which is a point of primary importance, the problems and complications which, as I have said, simply do not present themselves when the plays are acted, present themselves hardly more—and even then with an added spice of enjoyment—when they are

read receptively, appreciatively, and uncriticizingly. Again, while it is true that it is necessary to see the plays in action before we can fully appreciate their dramatic quality, it is equally true, and special stress must be laid on it at present, that we must have read and assimilated them before we can fully appreciate them in action. This applies of course obviously to the curtailed and mangled stage versions which are normally presented; but it applies likewise to the more complete renderings like those given at the Old Vic and those which alone, it is to be confidently hoped, would be admitted on the stage of any national theatre. The broad effects it is almost impossible—I wish I could say quite impossible—to miss in the theatre: the delicacy, subtlety, profundity are often quite beyond the grasp of ordinary actors, and must often remain so even in a trained company like Shakespeare's own. Intelligence on the stage and intelligence in the audience are alike necessary for adequate interpretation; and this can only be reached by reading and re-reading, by such a familiarity that we have assimilated the plays and they have become alive in our own life. Perhaps lack of intelligence in the audience is the more fatal defect of the two; for the actors can only give, in the end, what the audience can receive. A trained company can no doubt gradually educate their audience; but a trained audience can, through the impalpable magnetic virtue to which physical obstacles are transparent, exercise as powerful if a subtler influence on actors. It is often and justly deplored that actors in Shakespearian parts do not know Shakespeare: that the body of his work is for them an unopened book; and that even in the

play in which they are acting they are neither trained nor expected to study it as a whole, or anything in it beyond their own part. This is one of the great objects to be pursued by a national theatre and its ancillary network of municipal theatres with permanent companies and a corporate tradition such as has been continuous in the Théâtre français for nearly three centuries. But the fault lies with audiences as much as with actors. A trained audience may be capable (as Shakespeare's audiences probably became capable to a quite considerable extent) of appreciating the structure of one of Shakespeare's tragedies or comedies as presented to them in action even without having read it, and certainly without having studied it. But as against the freshness of impact must be set the necessary incompleteness of any rapid and transitory series of impressions; many delicacies must be missed, many points disappear before they can be seized on their passage. As the film of stage-production is reeled out, its movement cannot be slackened for thought, or repeated for fuller comprehension; nor is it ordinarily possible to see the same production night after night in order to stereoscopize its effect as well as to pay fuller attention to beauties of wording or artifice of construction. It is necessary to know, to study, to assimilate the text of the play as literature, both before and after seeing and hearing it as a concrete work of art. Only thus, by this double and closely interlinked process, can the approach to Shakespeare be made more than a mere approach, and become an effective entrance into Shakespeare's world.

Here a further point must be made. The stage-

productions of Shakespeare, as things are, are made in a transposed key: and the transposition affects their quality profoundly. In one sense, we can perhaps appreciate them more than they were in fact appreciated by their original audiences; works of art actually gain as well as lose by time. But the changes in the whole mechanism and surroundings of the theatre have clouded and confused the impression they were meant to produce. Simplification can do much: mutilation is not now carried to its old extravagance. The artificial reconstitution of the Elizabethan stage, not as yet carried beyond a partial and experimental point, has nevertheless been instructive and stimulating. Those who saw, three years ago, Sir Barry Jackson's *Hamlet* in modern dress, will remember how it cleared away, as one might say, layer on layer of gauze that the conventional dressing had spread between the action and the audience, and allowed us almost, one might add, to see the drama itself in direct unclogged action for the first time in our experience. But there is another obscuring or distorting modernization which is of at least equal importance: I mean, the introduction of women to take the female parts in the plays; and even now and then, most unhappily, to take male parts also. That the plays were originally acted by men and boys, and that they were written in order to be so acted, has always been known. But it has not been known, in the phrase of theologians, savingly. It has not been realized as a matter of practice that the transposition to a wholly different instrument than that for which the artist composed his work of art makes a vital change in the work of

art itself. Still less has it been realized—though Mr. Granville-Barker has emphasized this, and it is not the least of the services he has done to dramatic art—that the women of the plays were consciously and deliberately drawn within the compass, and to the scale, in which they could be, as they were, enacted by boys. In Shakespeare's plays there is but one possible exception. In the super-drama of *Antony and Cleopatra*—a play in which we may see the limits and conventions of the Jacobean stage bursting in all directions—it may be doubtful whether Cleopatra herself is within the compass of a boy. But Shakespeare knew best: and it may be added, that she is certainly beyond the compass of most women.

In a notice which appeared in *The Times* on 10 December 1929 of a performance of the *Magic Flute* by schoolboys, there is a passage so strikingly relevant that I may be allowed to quote it:

'A boy . . . will show forth the fantastic deeds and utter the simple moralities . . . with simple conviction. He can learn to move with ease and dignity upon a public platform. He needs for scenery nothing but a symbolic gateway and a tree to help him over the narrow gap between bare reality and the queer world of magic. The listener at a boys' performance, on his part, finds that nothing comes between him and Mozart.'

This, *mutatis mutandis*, is just the aim or ideal towards which we may hope to see more and more approximation: that nothing should come between us and Shakespeare. The Shakespearian world, as he created it and embodied it in sensible forms, is a solid reality; it is also a queer world of magic. Both the reality and the magic are obscured, weakened, dis-

torted by the introduction into it of sex-appeal. That appeal is not felt when we read the plays.

It is a great advantage in such reading to have some clear notion (as we easily can) of the groups into which the plays fall, corresponding to successive stages in Shakespeare's life as a playwright, and his response to the varying demands made on him by the development of the theatrical art, its place in national life, and the audiences for whom, and before whom, his plays were produced. Shakespeare (it has been well said) changed as an organism changes, in response to its environment. There was perhaps never a case of clearer or more constant adaptation. He was clay to every potter; a sensitive-plate which received, recorded, and reproduced all that passed in front of it. He did not make much immediate impression on his surroundings. During his life he was—here evidence and lack of evidence concur and reinforce each other—simply classed as one among other playwrights. For a while he was regarded jealously, in a notoriously jealous profession, by those who thought he was taking the bread out of their mouths, who could not help feeling with some mortification that he did his job better, quicker, more cleverly and effectively than they, and who accordingly pronounced him a climber and an upstart. Even that jealousy soon died away. When he rose to be a leading man in the profession, a joint proprietor and manager of the foremost London theatre, he worked in cordial co-operation with younger men —with Beaumont, Fletcher, Massinger—not as a master but as a colleague: retouching, rehandling, putting together their work as he had done years

before with the work of his seniors: quite content, so far as appears, to merge his work with theirs, or to let them piece out his own: making no bones about letting some of his most superb work appear side by side with poor stuff of theirs; with the facile vulgarities of Fletcher in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, or with the childish, ill-written, incoherent work of a third-rate hack like the writer of the first two acts of *Pericles*.

Shakespeare was an artist, not a critic. Probably he criticized his own work as little as he did that of others. With both, he retouched, remodelled, rewrote, freely: but more by instinct than to comply with any rules of his own or meet any criticisms from others. Metrical analysis, over and above the more imponderable features of style, indicates that a number of his earlier plays have bits of later work in them: as conversely, some of his latest have bits in them which, if they are his at all, are obviously early work. For this last, no reason need be sought beyond his desire to save himself trouble, his choice at any juncture of the easiest way. His plays were written at high speed, and produced before they had time to cool. Even the bad Quartos may represent something nearer actual performances than is generally supposed. Where the First Folio differs materially from a good Quarto it undoubtedly represents a revised stage-version. It is probable that whenever a play of his was revived, and even while its first run was going on, he went over it, putting in, taking out, recasting whole scenes, rewriting whole speeches, besides making many minor alterations. We know that this was the case with *Love's Labour's Lost*, with

Romeo and Juliet, and very conspicuously with *Hamlet*. But it applies to the whole body of his work. Nor can we say of any single one of the plays that we possess it in a definite form approved by himself as, if not perfect, at least final. He did not take the trouble, it seems clear that he did not think it worth his while, to do anything of the kind. He supplied his company with a text, a libretto for performance, and left it at that.

The *locus classicus* here is Hamlet's two conversations with the players who have come to Elsinore (Act II, Sc. ii, and Act III, Sc. ii); these players are in effect Shakespeare's own company; dramatized of course, but not idealized. In the first of the two, he has ordered a play from their repertory, *The Murder of Gonzago*, for production the next evening.

> We'll ha't to-morrow night. You could, for a need, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down and insert in't, could you not?
>
> Ay, my lord.
>
> Very well.

No more: that is settled. In the other scene, Hamlet's speech of advice to the players is the most autobiographic passage in all Shakespeare's work. It shows what he had to work with, and what he had to contend against. Four points deserve special notice. Two are about the trials of the dramatist, on the one hand from the mouthing, strutting, and bellowing of his tragedians, on the other, from the irrepressible gagging of his comedians. The former went so far as to affect even the matter of their speeches; it accounts perhaps for the odd and un-

pleasant bombast in Act I, Sc. ii of *Macbeth*, as that has reached us. The latter was notorious; it is said that Kemp had to be turned out of the company for it, after it had become insupportable in his rendering of the part of Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*. The other two are constructive, and touch on principles or aims of the dramatic art; the stress laid on 'the censure of the judicious'—the appeal, that is, to the higher instincts of the audience—and the celebrated dictum that the chief end of the drama is 'to show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure'.

This phrase deserves scrutiny. The wording is aptly chosen, not random or conventional; it throws light on the whole art of Shakespeare. It was the form and pressure of human life which Shakespeare took and re-embodied. To that form he shaped himself; to that pressure he responded. His impressionableness (using the word in its strict sense) is unsurpassed, is even unequalled. But to his contemporaries, as we have noticed, he was not impressive. Nor, perhaps, in spite of anything that may be advanced from the Sonnets to the contrary, was he impressive to himself. 'He did not rightly value his work', it has been grievingly said: he accepted the opinion of those about him. They at least did not realize, not one of them, that he was a sun among the stars. It is significant that in the detailed and enthusiastic accounts given by Beaumont, and later by Herrick, of the suppers at the Mermaid or at other taverns frequented by men of letters, the Sun, the Devil, the Dog, the Triple Tun, there is no mention of Shakespeare as one of the company. He was there,

taking in everything, and perhaps giving out little. Fuller's famous description of the wit-combats between him and Jonson was written more than forty years after Shakespeare's death, and when his posthumous apotheosis was in process of growth. At best it only represents a second-hand tradition, and that tradition may not be authentic. Much has been made of the eulogy by Meres in 1598, but Meres was not a person whose opinion counted for much. Shakespeare's retirement from the theatre and from London seems to have passed almost unnoticed. Even his death, most remarkable of all, did not call forth, in that copiously elegiac age, a single extant line of elegy. When the First Folio was printed seven years later, it had a very moderate sale; it was nine years before the 500 copies were exhausted and a fresh issue called for. In the four prefatory poems printed with it, three are by writers of no importance whatever. They give the usual formulary and meaningless assurances of immortality. 'His works will make his name outlive his tomb,' says Digges. 'His days are done, that made the dainty plays,' says Holland. And the unidentifiable I.M. has the happy and novel fancy that the publication of the Folio is Shakespeare's re-entrance, his performance over, to receive the *plaudite* of the spectators. His contemporaries were too close to him to realize his greatness. We do not feel the 15 lb. to the inch pressure of the atmosphere. In daytime, we take daylight as a matter of course. But with the noble tribute of Jonson, the long process of Shakespeare's canonization began. It went on, slowly but in growing volume, until a century later it reached the stage at

which, in the words of Gibbon, 'idolatry of Shakespeare is inculcated from our infancy as the first duty of an Englishman'.

He was not impressive, for it was not his aim to impress people. He was always doing quite the reverse, taking their impression. Nothing escaped him. His perceptive power, for combined speed and accuracy of working, is incredible. His mind was like a sensitive plate which took instantaneously the impression of anything that passed within its range, and stored up its records with no conscious effort. As remarkable was his swiftness and certainty in reproducing from that vast body of records anything that suited for the purpose of the drama he was constructing. The records were not only of persons, of incidents, of characters, but also of words and phrases heard in talk or read in books: the former more than the latter, for there is no evidence or likelihood that he was a great reader. So far as can be ascertained or inferred, he was never out of southern England in his life. Though some of his plays found an early admittance into foreign repertories, though members of his own company are known to have taken part in professional tours abroad, in Denmark, Holland, France, Germany, it is almost certain, so far as one can prove a negative, that he was never one of these himself. His swiftness in writing is certain. We have the evidence of his colleagues that 'his mind and hand went together': 'what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers'. 'It had been a thing, we confess, worthy to have been wished', his editors add, 'that the author himself had lived to have set

forth and overseen his own writings.' But he lived long enough after his retirement, if that were all, to have done so. He did not do it, simply because he did not choose to do it.

It is one of the unsuspected fallacies which have done much to confuse and vitiate both understanding and appreciation of the plays, that Shakespeare is thought of, by some of his ablest and most accomplished interpreters as well as by others, as a conscious artist building up the structure of a play scientifically, having the whole action in view from the first, and that not only as regards the scenes actually presented, but as regards the whole background which they may seem structurally to imply. Nothing could be further from the truth; almost nothing could be more fatal to appreciation of the plays as they are—which is the real point. Mountains of theory have been piled up on what are, from first to last, false premises. They serve for edification, perhaps, sometimes. This sort of over-curious inquiry is conducted, needless to say, with remarkable subtlety and power, but not always with controlling common sense. Even in a book of which it is impossible to speak with too warm recognition or too high praise, Mr. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, there are a few passages which make one almost think that Mr. Bradley declines to allow the existence of a thing called dramatic illusion: or as we may alternatively call it, dramatic hallucination.

It would be easy to multiply instances; I will only mention two or three typical ones.

There is the Macbeth controversy, over the sudden-

ness with which the plan of killing Duncan forms itself, and the total disappearance of the motive of ambition in Macbeth as soon as it has set the action going. That was of course just what it was for. It has served its purpose, and is dropped.

There is the Hamlet controversy. Shakespeare here was working on an old story already dramatized, the plot of which he altered very materially, but without great regard for consistency. His Ophelia retains traces of the courtesan in the original story who is set to entrap Hamlet 'by wanton toys and vicious provocations'. Hamlet's feigned madness, on which the whole of the original story revolves, is taken up or dropped by Shakespeare just as it suits him.

So too with the Fool in *King Lear*, on whom so much sympathy has been lavished, and round whose slight and incidental figure such a framework of sentimental invention has risen. The verses with which he makes his exit in Act III, Sc. ii, winding up with 'This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time'—a characteristically Shakespearian touch—are stigmatized as an interpolation simply because they do not fit in to the artificial picture thus created, or because they jar on the good taste of critics. Shakespeare is above the rules of good taste, as the Emperor Sigismund was above the rules of grammar. What became of the Fool? the commentators ask; and some even blame Shakespeare for heartlessness because, with his usual nonchalance, he lets him drop out when he has served his purpose on the stage. Even Mr. Bradley speaks with seeming (though cautious) approval of the suggestion that

Shakespeare told the actor who took the part to show obvious signs of approaching death in the last scene where he appeared. 'It seems strange indeed', he says, 'that Shakespeare should have left us thus in ignorance.' There can be no ignorance of what does not exist. Shakespeare took no pains to fasten up loose ends. He was concerned with dramatic effectiveness, not with finished artifice of construction. That, he did not find in the world of life, and did not as a rule, though there are a few exceptions, invent in the world of his plays.

One may recall the stroke of malicious humour on the last page of *Northanger Abbey* in the mention of the unnamed young nobleman whom Eleanor Tilney marries, inserted with an adroit nonchalance that might be called, like so much else in Miss Austen's work, Shakespearian. 'Concerning him,' Miss Austen demurely observes, 'I have only to add (aware that the rules of composition forbid the introduction of a character not connected with my fable) that this was the very gentleman whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing bills resulting from a long visit at Northanger by which my heroine was involved in one of her most alarming adventures.'

This applies to the comedies as well as to the tragedies. There is a similar touch of mocking carelessness in the last lines of *Much Ado about Nothing*, with the two lines of high-flown stage verse followed and eclipsed by two more of perfectly prosaic prose:

Enter a Messenger.

My lord, your brother John is ta'en in flight
And brought with armed men back to Messina.

Ben. Think not on him till to-morrow. I'll devise thee brave punishments for him. Strike up, pipers!

[*Dance. Exeunt.*

Don John has melted into air, into thin air. So too, the joining up of loose threads at the end of *As You Like It* by the marriage of Oliver and Celia to make a fourth couple, while it adds to the stage-effect of the final tableau—which is what Shakespeare cared about—is so unmotived and casual that it has always made the critics uneasy. And the way in which the three couples are paired off or huddled off at the end of *Measure for Measure* is even more flagrantly arbitrary. To many readers it gives, as regards two couples out of the three, an actual shock. As morals, or as psychology, it is indefensible. Shakespeare would probably have admitted this quite cheerfully, and asked what that mattered. Given that the piece was not to be a tragedy, it was the only conclusion that gave an effective final tableau. On the stage it does not in fact give any sensible shock except to those who have got the shock ready in their pockets.

'The best in this kind', says Theseus in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, 'are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them.' And to Hippolyta's critical inquiry, 'How chance Moonshine is gone before Thisbe comes back and finds her lover?' he makes the obvious reply, 'She will find him by starlight. Here she comes.' To get a dramatic situation, Shakespeare accepts improbabilities in the story he is handling, or even makes them more improbable if that suits his convenience. It is much the same with the glaring contradictions which have caused so much anxiety to commentators

on *Othello*, but which when *Othello* is presented—or when it is read in the right spirit of abandonment—never occur to spectator or reader. The action of the play is the only reality. To try to go behind it or beyond it is a course at once endless and futile. We may usefully remind ourselves, when we feel inclined to embark on such voyages of exploration, of Dickens's Mr. Curdle, and his pamphlet of sixty-four pages on the character of the Nurse's deceased husband in *Romeo and Juliet*, with an inquiry whether he really had been a merry man in his lifetime, or whether it was merely his widow's affectionate partiality that induced her so to report him.

To take two more instances. Much ink has been spilt over the reason for the sadness of Antonio, of which so much is made in the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. All that Shakespeare concerned himself with was to get Antonio on to the stage at once, and to make it clear that with all his fine nature he has no energy, no initiative, suffers from low vitality, and is without the qualities that fit a man to cope with a crisis. But for this, the events that follow could not have happened.

Or again, a question gravely debated, what were the previous relations between Hamlet and Ophelia? The answer is, there were none. Outside of the play, previous to the opening of its action, Hamlet and Ophelia do not exist. We might as well invent a life-history of Autolycus' aunts, or speculate on the kind of married life that Sir Toby and Lady Belch had after the curtain went down on *Twelfth Night*. 'That's all one, our play is done', are actually the closing words there.

'The actors are at hand,' as Quince observes in the final couplet of the prologue to the tragical mirth of Pyramus and Thisbe: 'and by their show you shall know all that you are like to know.' Yet these speculations recur over and over again: such is the potency of that illusion of reality which Shakespeare's dramatic genius gives to his characters. He creates a world; a world of life swifter, tenser, more vivid than that of actual experience. As he reels out his pageant we yield to the illusion. We accept his art. At a touch, for his touch is incomparably adroit and certain, he can set that film-world into motion, can make its figures speak, act, think or feel, exult or suffer, as though they were really alive.

II

THE SHAKESPEARIAN CANON, AND THE PRELUDES

So far we have been dealing with certain preliminary considerations, bearing on the methods in which the approach to Shakespeare may most effectively be made; on the attitude of mind and the equipment of preparation with which it is desirable, or essential, to enter on the study of Shakespeare; on certain common mistakes to be avoided, and certain truths to be borne in mind. If what was urged seemed at any point to decry the severer Shakespearian scholarship which is a proper subject of University studies, it was its misuse, not its value, which was deprecated. Emphasis was laid on the maxim—a truism as it may be called, but nevertheless a truth too often ignored in practice—that acquaintance with Shakespeare should precede, and be the basis for, all study of Shakespeare which is to be either scientific or vital. That further and more careful study, whether it be regarded as an exercise or as an instrument, is in either case a means, not an end. Both as an intellectual gymnastic, and as a help towards finer and fuller appreciation, it is invaluable. But the more it is pursued as an end in itself, or as a merely scientific investigation, the greater is the risk of its becoming dehumanized. It may be misused in two ways: by over-absorption in minute or unimportant details to the neglect of the vital human element, and consequently, to an atrophy of intelligence; and by premature entry upon it. Textual criticism indeed, that admirable intellectual

discipline, is a field of study which is not likely to be opened up too early or to be cultivated too carefully; it lies at the basis of all truly scholarly study of literature. It is in inferences drawn from an established text, in theories built up about it, that the danger lies. In the somewhat similar field of Homeric studies, the appreciation of Homer, the greatness, as art, of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, was during the last century largely obscured by the obsession of such theories. With Shakespeare these obsessions are perhaps more subtly dangerous, because so much is known both of his sources and his environment that material can be collected from it in support of any theory however preposterous. Of these there are plenty: apart even from the Baconian absurdity, and the more recent ascription of Shakespeare's works to the Earl of Oxford originated by Mr. J. T. Looney in 1920 and pursued since by others. We need not here waste our time on them. Most dangerous and most subtle of all is what we might call the new Bowdlerizing: the denial of Shakespeare's authorship to anything in the Canon which we think unlike him or unworthy of him, which we suppose he could not or would not or ought not to have written, or are confident (and here at least we are on solid ground) that we would not have written ourselves. Even short of that, there are quantities of cases where attribution of authorship is reasonably arguable, and attempts at its determination are a useful exercise even from an early stage of study. But except as an exercise, this is for mature scholars, and not for all of them. It requires experience, judgement, and a fine artistic sense to determine, if it be determinable, whether a particular

passage, say, in *King Henry VI* is Marlowe, or Shakespeare writing like Marlowe; in *King Henry VIII*, Fletcher, or Shakespeare accommodating himself to Fletcher's manner; in the non-Fletcherian scenes of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare, or Massinger writing as like Shakespeare as he can. In *Titus Andronicus* good judges are still uncertain whether there is any of Shakespeare's actual hand at all.

Only when we have surrendered ourselves to Shakespeare do we really appreciate him. That surrender is the beginning of vital Shakespearian study, the study of Shakespeare as an artist and of his plays as works of art. It is the beginning, and it is also, in an enlarged and heightened degree, the end. That appreciation once gained is never lost, it increases. But it cannot begin too early; and it may be doubted whether it can ever be fully attained if it begins late.

But in reinforcement of this appreciation, no less than for other and more technical purposes, it is not only useful but indispensable, to do more; to read the plays, or to see and hear them acted, discriminatingly. While Shakespeare is an ocean to be voyaged over, and while to each new voyager it presents itself at first as an unplumbed and unexplored ocean, our voyages over it, once its fascination has taken hold of us and its call reached us, become more delightful and more profitable when they are made with chart and compass. 'This wild dedication of yourselves To unpath'd waters, undreamed shores'—in his own splendid words—gives place more and more, as study is prolonged and deepened, to voyages in which the armament of knowledge is applied to the recep-

tion of art. Art itself, in the phrase used of it by a great English artist, is the joy of life; and is the joy not only of the maker but of the user.

While then each of the plays of Shakespeare is a work of art complete in itself, while they are not, and were not meant to be, a continuous series, a massed and developed architectural structure, we appreciate each of them much more fully if we have as a background the order and connexion of the whole series, spreading as they do over a period of some twenty years of production. For thus not only do they throw light on one another, but what is more important, they reflect a progress or evolution in Shakespeare's methods and handling, in his use of language, in his management of action, in his whole dramatic treatment: and further, the way in which these in turn reflect the changes of the Shakespearian environment, and the development of the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama as an organic process, up to and beyond its culmination. More particularly, we are thus enabled to grasp the illuminating and significant fact that the whole production falls into two periods, distinct from one another, the division between them coming, by a convenient accident, almost at the point of transition from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century; and the distinction being so marked that we might almost speak of them (without pressing the phrase too far) as the first and second or as the Elizabethan and Jacobean Shakespeare.

The Shakespeare Canon consists of the thirty-six plays collected and published in 1623, with the addition, only made forty years later but since then universally accepted, of *Pericles*. As we have

noted, his manuscripts all went into the store-room of the company, to run their chance of survival or mutilation or destruction there. He does not seem to have made or kept any copies. If he had, surely Mrs. Hall, wise to salvation as her epitaph alleges her to have been, would not have put them in the kitchen fire just when they were beginning to be of some market value. Nor would Heminges and Condell have been unaware of their existence, or if they were aware of it, have ignored what would have made their own work as editors sensibly lighter. In Sonnet 81, that remarkable poem in which Shakespeare—if we may suppose him to be speaking in his own person, and not only, in Mrs. Quickly's phrase, 'rheumatically'—looks to a time near at hand when 'in me each part will be forgotten' and when 'I to all the world must die', the concluding couplet

> You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen,
> Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths of men,

suggests that the spoken, not the written word is what lives and confers life. He wrote his plays as copy for the actors, and did not contemplate their being read by any one else. The single plays put into print from time to time were published in some cases, it would seem, with his tacit consent, but not at his instance. Even that was contrary to the policy of the playhouse which owned them. To print them was at best, from the managers' point of view, merely a convenient way of having a number of copies available for preparing any stage-revival instead of having to depend on a single frail, sometimes illegible, and often mutilated prompt-copy. At Shakespeare's

death, twenty of the plays of the Canon had not been printed at all. So far as he knew or cared, all the twenty might have disappeared for ever: as there is ground for believing that other vanished work of his perished at the Globe playhouse when it was burned down in June 1613. Among the twenty plays thus rescued for the delight and astonishment of succeeding ages were included those masterpieces in the fields of comedy, tragedy, and romance, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*. What a slender chance; what prodigious good fortune!

No one will need to be reminded that the contents of the First Folio were arranged there in a conventional and in many ways a very unsatisfactory order. This order has been as a rule followed in the innumerable subsequent editions; partly from mere conservatism and force of tradition; partly also, and with more reason, because the difficulties that arise, when an attempt is made to rearrange the order, multiply, and any rearrangement that goes beyond substituting one convention for another raises problems over which there is much contention, and a good many of which are admittedly insoluble.

The First Folio really consists of three volumes, each separately paged, but bound up together with a single title-page and certain pages of introductory matter. The first of these three volumes purports to contain fourteen Comedies, the second ten Histories, the third twelve Tragedies. That division itself, though convenient, is not very satisfactory. As regards the section entitled Histories (i.e. the plays

dealing with English history and the lives of English kings) no exception need be taken: though it is worth notice that in the titles of the separate plays of the section, the term History is only used once (*The Famous History of the life of King Henry VIII*) and two, *Richard II* and *Richard III*, are expressly entitled Tragedies. But for the twenty-six plays which are not histories in that defined and restricted sense, division into two blocks of comedies and tragedies, even if the distribution as between these were more rational than it is, stretches the meaning of both Tragedy and Comedy beyond what it will well bear. Polonius's celebrated catalogue 'tragedy, comedy, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited', pretty well expresses our feelings when we try to sort out and differentiate. What 'scene individable' means (if it means anything) is not clear; it might be either a short one-act piece, or a piece in which the technical dramatic unities are strictly observed: in neither case does the First Folio provide us with a specimen. But it may only mean closely knit in construction, without any underplot or any dramatic irrelevancies. With that exception, all Polonius's terms might be applied to one and another of Shakespeare's plays; nor would the division even then be exhaustive. But Polonius stops rather from lack of breath than because he has completely traversed the ground.

On what, if any, principle *A Winter's Tale* was placed among the Comedies, and *Cymbeline* among the Tragedies it is impossible to say; it may be plausibly conjectured that these plays were dumped

at the end of the two volumes merely because there was no obvious place in which to put them. That too may be the reason why the volume of Comedies leads off with *The Tempest*, which is hardly a comedy in any strict sense. Modern reclassification cuts the knot by calling all these three plays Romances: a convenient term which has the advantage of being very elastic, and the disadvantage of being very ambiguous.

Apart from these three pieces, the order, or disorder, in which the contents of the three volumes are placed might almost have been invented for the confusion of posterity. It is a hindrance to the study (as distinct from the large uncritical reading for delight, of which I spoke as the beginning of wisdom and the true initial approach) of Shakespeare's work as a whole; for it jumbles up early, middle, and later work hopelessly. The Histories, indeed, are arranged on a method which is at least intelligible; i.e. in the chronological order of the kings with whom and whose reigns they deal. But in the other two volumes it is impossible to make out any order or system of arrangement at all. Now to read the whole body of Shakespeare's plays, as nearly as may be, in the order in which he produced them, is a great help to understanding them, to reading them appreciatively; it is often a sort of new revelation. Research, pursued laboriously and minutely by a long series of scholars and investigators, has enabled us to date the first production of many among them definitely, and of much the greater number approximately; and the composition of a play was usually, though not always, followed at once by its production on the stage.

Plays were normally written for the exigencies of the theatre to which the playwright was attached, to supply an immediate demand on the part of the company, and having regard to what kind of play the audience wanted and what would fill the theatre best. But there are cases in which the production of a play which had been prepared was, for one reason or another, long deferred; there were plays written which never got on to the stage at all; and there were certainly others which went through a long process of incubation before their first production, as there were many, in fact perhaps the majority, which were cut about, recast, remodelled over and over again for revivals. The prompt-copies, from which most of the contents of the First Folio were set up in print, represent for any particular play a revised text used in whole or in part for stage-production; sometimes with alterations made years later than the original text, sometimes also with alternative scenes from which a selection was made for a particular performance. There is a well-known case in *Love's Labour's Lost* where a passage marked for cancellation and the passage written to replace it have both by inadvertence been put into print. With *Hamlet* again, it is pretty certain that the whole of the play as we possess it in the vulgate, i.e. in a conflation of the texts of the First Folio and Second Quarto, was never in fact put on the stage at a single performance.

While the groups of plays overlap in date; while the chronological order of plays within a group is often uncertain; and while in naming any fixed date for the public production of a play we have to bear in mind that it may have been written a long time

before it was produced, and that it may have been (as in some instances it undoubtedly was) not merely retouched but to a considerable extent rewritten years after its first production, it is possible, with a margin for error which is not really very great, to place them and read them in the order of their composition. By doing so, we are enabled to have a sort of chart for guidance through that complex wilderness, that unmapped sea: and thus gradually a perspective forms, a living picture is created: a picture not indeed of Shakespeare himself—he remains transparent and inscrutable—but of the Shakespearian drama as it took shape, grew, developed, was transformed, in those twenty years which are the day of Shakespeare: the years which lie between the time when he first set hand to the drama as an apprentice and the time when he relinquished it to a new generation, and the lights began to burn dim and to go out.

No attempt, I think, had been made to produce a chronologically arranged edition of Shakespeare before Furnivall's of 1876; and not many have been made since. Nor is this surprising: perhaps it is not even regrettable; for it will be evident in view of the considerations just indicated, that the thing is an impossibility; though it is both possible and desirable to improve on the order of the First Folio and remove some of its most obvious absurdities. It may be noticed here that Mr. Whibley's three-volume edition purports to be, and is entitled, 'The Works of Shakespeare, chronologically arranged'; but as it retains the tripartite division into Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies, one volume of each, this

description is a little misleading. But all modern annotated editions of single plays, and all hand-books to Shakespeare, give the relevant facts as to dates fully. When in process of time the new Cambridge Shakespeare edited by Sir A. Quiller-Couch and Professor Dover Wilson is completed—only thirteen of the plays have so far been published—the volumes can be, and it is well that they should be, arranged on the shelf in the approximately ascertainable order. In dealing here with the approach to Shakespeare it will be sufficient, and it is all that is possible, to summarize the main facts and to trace the general lines of growth. Towards this, we may begin by laying down certain landmarks.

It is a material aid to memory, and does not materially force or distort the facts (so far as the facts have anything like assured certainty) if we think of Shakespeare's dramatic activity, including both composition and production of the plays, as belonging to and falling within four successive periods of seven years each, which may be broadly and loosely described as those of the apprenticeship, of the Comedies and Histories, of the Tragedies, and of the Romances. Such seven-year periods are traditionally used for distinguishing stages in the life of the individual: in both cases they are a convention, but one that is really convenient, and within its limits, useful. Its convenience here is that it serves as a label, or key-plan, for four stages in the evolution of the English drama, in Shakespeare's hands and in those of his predecessors, collaborators, and successors. In these a number of fixed, or approximately fixed, dates for which there is good evidence may be

set down as boundary marks. Among them, the four septennates cover the time between Shakespeare's first introduction to the theatrical world and his final relinquishment of it. As we have already observed, his productive activity does not extend over the whole of this period, but only over about twenty years of it. His coming to London from Stratford may be put with fair certainty as in or about 1586, when he was twenty-two. But it is five years after that before there is clear evidence of any of his own early plays, or of his collaborations and remodellings of plays by other hands, being put on the stage. His withdrawal from active management, from playwriting, and from London altogether, took effect gradually. His latest play, so it is generally agreed, is *The Tempest*; and there is an official record of its performance at Court in November 1611. The contributions made by him to the *Two Noble Kinsmen*, the date of which is unknown, may be later: and those, if any—at the most they are slight—made by him to Fletcher's *King Henry VIII*, produced early in 1613, are later. But broadly speaking, the years 1591–1611 cover the day of Shakespeare. It stretches from the fiery dawn of Marlowe to the silver twilight of Massinger. Then night soon fell; or a new and common day succeeded.

Shakespeare began as an underling, as a theatrical apprentice. What preliminary education (using that word in its wide sense) he had acquired is a matter on which there is little or no evidence. At the free Grammar School of Stratford he would have, as things went, a good grounding; he doubtless had many opportunities of seeing dramatic performances

by travelling companies; and the suggestion, for which there is some slight and very precarious evidence, that he taught for some time in another Warwickshire school, and while doing so had opportunities for wider reading, and perhaps for organizing amateur performances such as are brought on the stage in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, is not without plausibility. But this is all conjecture. What is certain is that whether or not he migrated to London with any fixed intention of attaching himself to the theatrical industry, he very soon found his vocation there. His great swiftness of workmanship, his mastery of copious, flexible, and melodious language, and his sure instinct for effectiveness, soon made him the handy-man of the company. He was employed more and more as an adapter and reviser of plays for stage production; retouching the work of Kyd, remodelling that of Peele and Greene, and collaborating with Marlowe, who was within a couple of months his exact contemporary, but whose precocious genius had displayed itself some years earlier, before he left Cambridge for London in 1587. When Shakespeare launched himself on the turbid sea of life that surged round the theatres, he took to it like a duck to water, good-humouredly ready to do anything that he was set to do and doing everything he did well. Detraction of course he could not wholly escape. The outburst of Greene in 1592 against the upstart, the 'crow beautified with our feathers', the 'absolute Johannes Factotum', 'in his own conceit the only Shake-scene', perhaps only says, with the petulant vehemence of a sick, unsuccessful, embittered, dying man, what

others felt but were afraid or ashamed to say. But Shakespeare's own sweetness of temper, no less than the ability which malice itself could not deny, disarmed his colleagues or rivals. Greene died; Greene's publisher made a handsome apology: and we hear no more of any ill-feeling. Shakespeare had slid into his environment, and fitted into it with frictionless ease. The acquiescence was on both sides, outwardly at least, complete.

Much of Shakespeare's journeyman-work in patching, adapting, and writing up plays to meet the constant and growing public demand has no doubt been lost and left no trace. What remains shows him feeling his way and trying his hand in many dramatic forms. One of these soon takes prominence. The vogue of plays from English history had begun. Marlowe had gone over to it and given it a fresh impulse by the production of *Edward II*, an epoch-making play in as full a sense as the earlier *Tamburlaine* and *Faustus*. Dramatic blank verse had been, if not created by him, made by him into an instrument of wonderful compass and power. It was just at this point that Shakespeare took the thing up. The three consecutive parts of *Henry VI* (really a continuous chronicle-play in three sections) are, as they stand, preponderantly Shakespeare's work. In *Richard III*, which continues and completes the series of the Contentions of York and Lancaster, we may still trace the hand of Marlowe, and the influence of Marlowe is throughout unmistakable: but the actual composition, so far as it does not merely revise and tune up the older play on which it was based, is almost entirely Shakespeare's own. Of the other Histories

to which we shall have to return, mention is for the moment postponed.

These history-plays were only one part of Shakespeare's occupation in his apprentice-years. Concurrently, he was feeling out over the whole sphere of the drama, and producing trial pieces in different manners, careful experiments in dramatic form and handling. Four of these are extant, all remarkable (besides their other qualities) for a sense of texture new in the art of the English playwrights. In them, he handles a wide keyboard: and we may observe in all of them the aim to assemble (in the engineering phrase) the parts of his mechanism, and to incorporate the elements which hitherto had been struggling with one another in the evolution of the drama, or had been only placed in an inorganic juxtaposition. The earliest of the four (and the earliest probably of all Shakespeare's extant work) is the very interesting and instructive *Love's Labour's Lost*, a comedy of criticism and satire in which a slight thread of plot is very adroitly manipulated, and which already shows the fertility and fluency, the pervading lyrical quality, the command of rhythm and language, in which he stands apart from all his contemporaries. These qualities, together with a further advance in dramatic construction, are also conspicuous in the two plays with which he followed it. In the sentimental or romantic comedy of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where he makes fun of sentiment and pushes romance to the edge (or over the edge) of parody, the strings of his puppets, in a very complicated mechanism, are completely under his control. We see, but we are meant to see, the strings, and we miss

the whole value of the play if, as too often is done, we either apologize for, or attempt to explain away, or worst of all, gravely censure, its delightful absurdities. The other, *The Comedy of Errors*, shows a similar mastery in its reconstruction of the traditional Plautine comedy. In it, he took less pains with the writing; it seems as if he had here and there tumbled into it, pretty much as he found them, lumps of material from some older English version of the *Menaechmi*; and here and there, with some effect of incongruity, he lets his own lyric quality break in, not only in lines or passages, but in the beautiful if slightly touched parts of Aegeon and Luciana. It may be noted that it is one of the plays which must be seen in action in order to be appreciated. Many people, and one cannot blame them, find it rather heavy reading: on the stage its incongruities disappear, its intricacies disentangle themselves, it moves with radiant speed. Even so early, Shakespeare had completely mastered stagecraft.

For its exercise, he now turned to another and a larger field. In *Romeo and Juliet*, a play on which he bestowed unusual care and which he subjected to repeated revision, he entered the province of high romance, and produced not only a proof-piece but a masterpiece. It and *Hamlet* are the two plays of his which, more than all the others, have had up to the present day an unbroken and unchallenged acceptance. Always familiar and always new, they have held audiences and readers of every degree and class alike enthralled and enraptured. On its lyrical quality —it was of this quality I suppose that Milton was thinking when he spoke of Shakespeare warbling his

woodnotes—words need not be wasted; nor on the atmosphere which fills and saturates it; nor on the intensity of its natural magic.

> Lo! in the middle of the wood,
> The folded leaf is woo'd from out the bud
> With winds upon the branch, and there
> Grows green and broad, and takes no care,
> Sun-steep'd at noon, and in the moon
> Nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow
> Falls, and floats adown the air.
> Lo! sweeten'd with the summer light,
> The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
> Drops in a silent autumn night.

There are whole scenes in it which, more almost than any other poetry, make one feel the value of Dryden's famous definition of poetry as articulate music. The best appreciations that have been made of it are in a way echoes or overtones of that music. A single sentence of Coleridge's, dropped casually in a discussion of Beaumont and Fletcher's plays, is perhaps the best known, and the best, of these: 'It is a spring day, gusty and beautiful in the morn, and closing like an April evening with the song of the nightingale.' That is true, and is beautifully said; it is criticism which has become itself art; only a poet could have so felt and so expressed it. Yet it gives only one facet of the jewel; it does not touch, indeed it misses, a great part of its complex and pervading colour. Who could guess or gather from it the brooding heat and heavy perfume of the atmosphere in which the play is steeped, for those five days of tense and breathless action under the ardours of an Italian July? 'The day is hot, the Capulets abroad': 'As I

did sleep under the yew-tree here, I dreamt my master and another fought, and that my master slew him': 'Some meteor that the sun exhales, to be to thee this night a torch-bearer.'

Another remarkable point about *Romeo and Juliet* —a thing rare or even unique in Shakespeare's dramas—is the minute exactness with which the action is set out. Generally, Shakespeare cares little about this. Dramatic value, as he seems to have clearly recognized from the first, does not depend on completeness and continuity of action in the scenes successively presented. If they are too studiously sought after, the dramatic illusion is actually impaired. A play loses in its dramatic as well as in its aesthetic and emotional effect if it gives a feeling, even indistinctly and unconsciously, of being overmechanized, of a kind of artificial perfection. The inconsistencies in the plot of *Hamlet*, the impossibilities in the plot of *Othello*, are notorious and cannot be explained away. It may be claimed, indeed, that they are, if not deliberately purposed, at all events fully justified: that they help to give the plays a subtle enhancement of arresting and compelling power. Their incoherence is like that of life itself, and has something of the same awful and enigmatic quality. This is more specially true of the tragedies, where they keep us, as readers or spectators (to use Shakespeare's own remarkable words) from ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear. But in *Romeo and Juliet*, although as a tragic romance rather than a tragedy in the strict sense it might have availed itself of all the licence of romance, the conduct of the

story is almost mathematically perfect. We can follow it point by point, day by day, very nearly hour by hour, from nine o'clock on the Sunday morning at which it opens, to the Friday's dim overclouded dawn with its 'glooming peace' which descends on the dead lovers and lifts for the break of a new day over an obscure horizon.

Romeo and Juliet, I said, is rather a tragic romance than a tragedy in the full sense. Is it a tragedy at all? If so, and so far as it is so, it stands alone in the period of Shakespeare's early work. Obviously it is only tragedy with a difference. It had that name from the first. In the surreptitious First Quarto it is entitled 'an excellent conceited Tragedie': in the authentic Second Quarto, 'the most excellent and lamentable Tragedie'. The phrases may remind one of the wording of the play-bill of Pyramus and Thisbe, as the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* is very nearly akin to the prologue spoken by Quince in that piece. In the First Folio, it is headed simply 'The Tragedie of Romeo and Juliet': and it is placed, oddly enough, between *Titus Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens*. But little stress need be laid on the title, if we remind ourselves that among the contents of volume 3 of the First Folio is also 'The Tragedie of Cymbeline'. 'Tragic' in the loose popular sense of the word, it undoubtedly is; but not in the more precise sense in which tragedy involves a conflict of will and an inexorable pressure of consequence: 'that law may fulfil herself wholly, to darken man's face before God'. The catastrophe is not, as in true tragedy it is, inevitable; it is brought about by what may be called a series of accidents, and these, if I may use the

phrase, accidental accidents, not as in Thomas Hardy's stories, the workings of a grimly satiric Power. It moves pity, but not fear. To tragedy in its full sense Shakespeare only turned much later; and he came to it through the medium of the tragical element in the history-plays to which we shall come later. At the other end of the scale, transcending tragedy in its strict definition much as *Romeo and Juliet* comes short of it, comes *King Lear*. There, in the tremendous words of Albany in the final scene,

> This judgment of the heavens that makes us tremble
> Touches us not with pity.

The two plays may be taken as the extreme points of the field over which tragedy, at its utmost range, can be extended.

It is conjectured that *Romeo and Juliet* was written for the new theatre, the Rose on the Bankside in Southwark, which was opened by Shakespeare's company early in 1592. He had now established his position as an important and indispensable member of the company, and likewise as a successful playwright. His apprenticeship both as artist and as craftsman was finished. A pause or gap comes here in his dramatic output; the apprenticeship had been arduous, and he had earned a holiday: but also he was turning his mind for the time to another field, that of non-dramatic poetry. Apart from the desire to graduate as a man of letters, a position which the playwright, as such, did not occupy and which in fact he hardly claimed, poetry was both fashionable and, if successful, lucrative. It brought patronage, and it had

a good chance of bringing a more tangible reward. The traditional story, which there seems no adequate reason to reject, that Southampton, in return for the dedication to him of *Venus and Adonis* and of *Lucrece*, paid Shakespeare lavishly: even the immense sum of £1,000 named, while it can hardly be credited, was apparently thought not incredible. It is in strong contrast to the £10 or less which as a playwright was all he could expect for the composition and preparation for the stage of a single play. To write poetry was emphatically 'the thing'. Even though it was genteel not to print, immense masses of MS. poetry by authors of distinguished birth and high station were circulated, copied, and greedily read. Shakespeare was not as yet technically a gentleman, one that may write himself *armigero*; it was some years later that he (in his father's name) applied for and received a coat of arms, and also became a landed proprietor in a small way at Stratford.

I have already touched on the subject of dramatic illusion, and pointed out by some instances how it is of the essence of the drama. I wish now to add something to supplement and reinforce this point.

In Prospero's famous speech towards the end of *The Tempest* when he has broken off the masque presented by him to Ferdinand and Miranda, and the performers, Ariel and his meaner fellow-spirits, 'to a strange, hollow and confused noise, heavily vanish', we seem, if we do but seem, to hear Shakespeare for once speaking in his own voice, unlocking—if one dares to say so—his own heart. The passage is almost too familiar to quote, but I must give it. It cannot be read too often or too carefully. Every

word in it is charged with significance and has a doubled and trebled meaning:

> Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air:
> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
> And like this insubstantial pageant faded
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

The music of the language is so entrancing that it is only by an effort, only indeed by repeated effort, that we can realize its full implication. The revels, transitory and suddenly ended, the pageant, insubstantial and even as he speaks faded, gone into nothingness, leaving not a rack behind, are not merely what has just been presented; they are the whole body of drama; of the dramas, 'things acted', which we alternatively, generally without any clear consciousness of what the word implies, call plays. The actors who are melted into air are the persons of the plays, not merely the individuals who impersonate them. The plays themselves are a baseless fabric: and at the same time they are a vision, they are the glimpse of something beyond reality. We may remember—it is not inapposite—that the title prefixed by Cary to his noble English rendering of the poem which Dante himself called a Comedy is 'The Vision'. That vision was of the other world; of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. The Shakespearian Canon is a vision

of this world; it might be called, in contrast to the other, to which after Dante's death the fuller title of the Divine Comedy was attached, the Human Comedy, a *Summa Anthropologiae*. Of this world, we are the inheritors, the transitory possessors; we came into it, as we might come into a theatre, we live in its atmosphere for a little, and then we depart from it, or it departs from us. The spectacle and the spectator only exist, as such, in their mutual relation; that link once broken, both alike fade, melt into air, dissolve, leave no trace behind. Not only the fabric of the drama, but we—and the word *we* means the whole human race—are such stuff as dreams are made on, the baseless fabric of an insubstantial pageant, the passage from sleep to sleep through a waking dream.

The masque presented by Prospero in the play is an illusion. The play in the course of which it is presented is an illusion. The whole body of drama in which *The Tempest* is one member is an illusion. No less, life itself is an illusion. That may be called Shakespeare's message, Shakespeare's implicit doctrine, if such words are applicable to him at all. The title of Calderon's masterpiece, *La Vida es Sueno*, might be put for a motto on the whole body of his work: as it might perhaps, but this goes far beyond the present scope of our consideration, be put for a motto on the whole body of creative and imaginative literature. The speech of Prospero to the young couple—nominally at least to them, though doubtless entirely beyond their comprehension—is in effect the last word of Shakespeare to the new generation, and to the human race. It is the artist comprehending and passing judgement on art, and this with the full

consciousness that art is the interpretation of and the key to life.

Otherwise, Shakespeare sets life before us and leaves us to draw our own conclusions: he passes no judgements, he draws no morals, he has no obsessions. And about his own work, he has no illusions. In the scene in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* to which I have already referred, Hippolyta, who has the instincts, and perhaps also the limitations, of a lady, calls the play she is seeing 'silly stuff'. Very likely she might, if she were alive and among us now, say the same of Shakespeare's own plays; as the American lady in Cairo said to Lord Cromer that she never saw anything in her life half so silly as the Pyramids. And Shakespeare, if he heard her, might good-naturedly rejoin, 'If that this will serve, so: if it will not, what remedy? The lady bade thee take away the fool; therefore I say again, take her away.' If even Shakespeare's best were, to Shakespeare himself, but shadows, it is less surprising that he took no concern for their permanence.

> The warp holds fast across, and every thread
> That makes the woof up has dry specks of red,
> Always the shuttle cleaves clean through, and he
> Weaves with the hair of many a ruined head.
>
> Love is not glad or sorry, as I deem.
> Labouring he dreams, and labours in the dream,
> Till, when the spool is finished, lo! I see
> The web, reeled off, curls and goes out like steam.

It is in a sense our duty, it is certainly a high privilege, to surrender ourselves to the illusion. Only when, and so far as, we do so, do we really appreciate Shakespeare.

III

THE DECADE OF THE COMEDIES

MARLOWE'S premature death in June 1593, when he had just reached the climax of his power, marks a distinct stage in Shakespeare's career as a dramatist. He stood alone henceforth among his contemporaries. He still collaborated; he still borrowed as well as lent freely; he accommodated himself to modes which came into fashion. He fully knew that they who live to please must please to live; he kept his finger on the pulse of his audiences, and often tossed provender to them, nonchalantly, of the kind they liked. But he had no co-mate now of anything like his own calibre, still less any master to be followed and caught up with and outstripped. Now, and for the next seven years—from the age of twenty-nine to the age of thirty-five—he runs his own race, as a strong man rejoicing in his strength. The morning star of the Elizabethan drama had been eclipsed. 'The star is fallen, and time is at his period.' But the sun had risen. In these years we have the first Shakespeare: the Shakespeare whom by the lucky accident of chronology already mentioned we might alternatively call the sixteenth-century, or the Elizabethan, Shakespeare. The second and the still greater Shakespeare was to follow, in a new century, and with a new scope and field.

He kept pouring forth swiftly, during the period with which we are now concerned, his finest work in the broad fields of comedy and history. He reaches out in the former field to the province of romance, in the latter to the province of tragedy; but both tragedy

and romance postpone their full evolution. We may notice his increasing mastery, won with no apparent trace of effort, over any form of drama to which he chooses to set his hand. The actual choice is guided, as it would seem, largely, if not mainly, by public demand and the immediate requirements of his company. He remains always ready to fill a gap by swift revision or retouching of plays by other hands, and once even (as the story goes, and it is not an improbable one) by producing a commanded piece, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, in three weeks. From tragedy, as distinct from the tragic histories, he kept wholly apart, unless we call *Titus Andronicus* a tragedy —which technically no doubt it is—and unless we also believe that there is enough of Shakespeare's hand in it to justify its inclusion in the First Folio. Alone in the Canon it is, except in a very small number of passages, devoid of the lyrical quality, the singing voice, which is a primary characteristic of the Shakespearian drama from first to last. The sanguinary and clumsily constructed melodrama is conjectured to be in the main the work of Kyd, and to have been slightly retouched by Shakespeare for a revival possibly suggested by the continued and long-continuing popularity of the *Spanish Tragedie*. Its chief interest is as a specimen of the kind of melodramatic supper of horrors which popular audiences welcomed, and which Shakespeare (to whom what was about him was always good enough) took up when called upon; but which, whenever he took it seriously in hand, he transfigured. Melodrama at all times, then and now, is in fact the raw material of tragedy. This piece presumably had Shakespeare's name

attached to it in order to attract fresh attention and to suggest that it was a new play. At that for the present we may leave it; only remarking that, if the theory be true, it is another sign of the value, for theatrical purposes, already attaching to Shakespeare's name.

As regards the so-called Histories, a distinction is to be drawn between different methods of dramatizing episodes in national history and the lives of English kings, which, though they mix and fluctuate, are essentially disparate. Of these there are at least three. First, there is the chronicle-play; the crude episodic dramatization of scenes in the national past, presenting a series of incidents without much structural unity, and with little of leading motive in their interlinking; in fact a scenic historical narrative cut into lengths suitable for single stage-representations. The typical instance of this inchoate drama is the series of pieces which, as touched up, pulled about and recast, later appear in the Shakespeare Canon as the three parts of *King Henry VI*. The rambling table of contents—it is rather that than a title—prefixed to the second of the three when first printed, is sufficiently descriptive of what was meant by a chronicle-play to require no further comment: 'The first part of the contention betwixt the two famous Houses of Yorke and Lancaster with the death of the good Duke Humphrey: and the banishment and death of the Duke of Suffolk, and the Tragicall end of the proud Cardinall of Winchester, with the notable Rebellion of Jacke Cade; and the Duke of Yorkes first claime unto the crowne.' *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry VIII*, twenty years later, is a curious and almost unique reversion to this

type of play, with the differences involved in the interval by the fuller organization and more elaborate presentment of dramatic performances, under court patronage and the influence of the masque. It is a series of dramatized scenes, with some amount of structural connexion given by the prominence of Wolsey in the first three acts, but otherwise arranged mainly with the view of introducing as great a number as possible of set scenes or pageants. It is an instructive instance of the periodic movement of the drama, in an orbit not returning into itself but proceeding, according to the normal laws of growth, in a spiral.

Next, and developing out of the former as more skilful composers took it in hand, is the tragical history-play, in which the rambling episodic treatment yields place to a more substantial and connected dramatic treatment centring round one figure, so that the play now begins to have a plot, and has a hero in the conventional sense of that word. *Richard II* and *Richard III* represent the two different types which this method can assume. *Richard III*, the earlier of the two, retains much of the chronicle method, but is lifted beyond it by the dominance in it from first to last of the figure of Richard himself. As almost certainly begun in collaboration with Marlowe, it is assignable rather to the end of the period of apprenticeship than to the beginning of the period of maturity. In any case, it is at the point of transition between the two. Those which followed it are Shakespeare's, and Shakespeare sounding, if as yet uncertainly, the chords of which he alone is master. Throughout the series is to be noted the

gradual and interrupted emergence of the high-tension quality of tragic art; at first only by fits and starts and in single scenes, and not even at last concentrated in full volume.

Richard II, the earliest of these, in the comparative slightness of its action, in the profuse fluency of its eloquence, and in the predominantly lyrical quality which pervades it, marks a reaction—or perhaps we should rather call it a liberation—both from the Marlowesque handling and from the chronicle-play tradition which perhaps was already becoming threadbare. In it, Shakespeare breaks away from both, and swings back, or swings out, into his own natural orbit. The strong likeness, and the equally strong contrast, between it and *Edward II*, show him taking up, as it were, the movement of expansion and enlargement which Marlowe had just lived to begin, and launching it on its new course. In *King John*, probably about a year later, he does not discard the chronicle-structure, taken over by him, in his habitual way, from an older and cruder play. But that piece he completely rewrote and re-moulded, putting into it his own vitality, his own dramatic skill, and some of his own noblest scenes. Further, as we shall have occasion to see him do again more than once, he strings the episodes into organic connexion through a single figure, on the secondary plane but of profoundly central importance, that of Fauconbridge. The device was apparently, both for him and for his audiences, new; but it had been employed at Athens by Sophocles, two thousand years earlier, with equal subtlety and effectiveness.

A longer interval follows: and then, in the two

parts of *King Henry IV*, he completely transfigures the type of history-plays, and effects triumphantly the organic union of tragic seriousness with irresponsible comedy: no longer, as they had been, sandwiched in slices where trivial farce alternated with pompous rhetoric, but fused in a single large structure. The two halves of this structure are dramatically as well as historically continuous: and this continuity is expressly emphasized in the Prologue to Part II spoken by Rumour, with its recapitulation of the events presented in the last Act of Part I.

Finally, and winding up the series of the Histories, he produced the spectacular piece or historical pageant of *King Henry V*. It was probably written, in its immediate occasion, as an attractive opening piece for the newly built Globe Theatre (the 'wooden O' of its opening chorus) with which the name of Shakespeare is henceforth intimately associated. He was not now only an employé, not only an actor in, and a playwright for, his company, but a partner in both ownership and management. Dramatically, *Henry V*, though it does not show actual retrogression from the plane which had been reached in *Henry IV*, is not of the same supreme quality. It is an application of his medium to a special treatment; it might almost be called a magnificent by-product. Its character as a pageant or series of pageants is deliberately emphasized by the choric prologues which introduce each of the five acts. In their sublimity and lyric fervour these monologues (unlike the few other instances in which, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, he employed the device of a prologue) are unique. We can hear in them, more certainly than elsewhere,

more unquestionably than even in the Sonnets, the voice of Shakespeare speaking for himself, for his colleagues, and for his profession. He is thought, and not without reason, to have let this personal note become audible again at the conclusion of *The Tempest*; if so, with a deeper and lordlier voice, as became his final farewell to his art. But *Henry V* is also in some sense a farewell, not to his art, but to one field in which he had exercised it: 'his final experiment', to quote Lee's excellent appreciation, 'in the dramatization of English history, rounding off, artistically and patriotically, the series which collectively form a kind of national epic.' This, the pageant, is the third of the three forms which the history-play can take. It anticipates or foreshadows the mixed manner of Shakespeare's later post-tragic period, as one or two of the earlier Histories foreshadow, though indistinctly, the emergence of tragedy proper in Shakespeare's art.

Otherwise, his work during this decade was, broadly speaking, in the field of comedy; work of wide variety, of increasing control, and finally of complete mastery. Five of the comedies belonging to the earlier years of the decade may be mentioned here with but little comment. *The Merchant of Venice*, a rather heavily weighted and (if one may dare to say so) over-mechanized play—though for the adroitness of its mechanism praise can hardly be too high—has nevertheless always been among the most popular of them all, and has never ceased to hold the stage. Partly this popularity is due to the wide scope it gives for interpretation of the character of Shylock; partly to the passages of lovely poetry with

which it is adorned; largely, perhaps mainly, to the immense effectiveness of the trial scene. Of *All's Well that Ends Well* it is a little difficult to speak with patience. It is the nearest approach that Shakespeare ever makes to a failure, and if it had not been salvaged for the First Folio we should have missed but little. To quote a phrase from it, 'the flame lacks oil', and for a good deal of it another and more mordant quotation might also be applied, and would perhaps have been accepted quite cheerfully by Shakespeare himself: 'chough's language, gabble enough and good enough.' He took for it a hopeless plot. Even his scenic instinct and adroitness of stage-handling fail except here and there to make it either pathetic or amusing; fail, to say the truth, to make it particularly interesting. The flame gutters; the vitality is low, and the characters, with the single exception of the old countess, are stock-figures not quite humanized, not quite Shakespearianized. 'We get to like Helena,' Coleridge says, 'from the other characters praising and commending her so much.' The observation is ingenious and acute. But I am not sure that we do get to like her; and in any case we should, like Master Dombledon, like better assurance than Bardolph. The other two of the group are light comedy approximating to farce. *The Taming of the Shrew* is, in fact, a rearrangement and touching up of a crude older piece, a good deal of which Shakespeare took over with little or no change, but which under his manipulation became brilliantly successful on the stage, even if, like *The Comedy of Errors* earlier, it has no high quality as literature and but few touches of the Shakespearian magic or of his

verbal and rhetorical felicity. That felicity is marked in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a piece written to order very rapidly and with great dexterity. It is a wonderful feat of sleight-of-hand. The dramatic structure is of the thinnest. It would be absurd to take it seriously, but the puppets dance to perfection. As a picture of middle-class life realistically treated it is priceless, and in Shakespeare unique. Without a touch of romance, of pathos, or, even in the little masque of fairies in the last scene, of lyrical quality, it has the freshness of country air and common daylight. Managed light-handedly as it is, and taken light-heartedly as it should be, it is as good reading as it is a uniform and certain success on the stage. Mrs. Page's concluding words:

> Let us every one go home
> And laugh this sport o'er by a country fire,
> Sir John and all,

are in effect Shakespeare's own criticism on it—whose else can we require?—and the sufficient answer to the higher critics who have deplored in it the degradation of Falstaff: forgetting that the best of them are but shadows, and the worst no worse if imagination amend them.

These words are from *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. The date of its production is still the subject of speculation and controversy, but it belongs to the middle years of this period. It may be called a comedy, but it stands in a class by itself, in which it has no predecessor and no follower; comedy, romance, fairy-tale, masque, no name adequately describes it. To some degree it is what Lyly had been feeling after, but neither in Lyly nor in the post-

Shakespearian drama is there anything really comparable to it; and the intricate and ingenious plot (if it can be called a plot) is so far as appears wholly Shakespeare's own invention; in this matter as in others it is unique in Shakespeare's work. It consists of four themes, interlaced with consummate skill: the court background of the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta: the double lovers' entanglement of Lysander and Hermia, Demetrius and Helena; the underplot, or secondary drama, of the Athenian artificers and the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude; and the fairy world of Oberon and Titania linked up with, and playing over, all these. It gives the feeling of a whole pent-up flood of romantic imagination let loose, but guided by masterly skill into the most exquisite form, with incomparable suavity and beauty. Perfect alike in modelling, in ornament, in atmosphere, drenched with beauty, sparkling with fun, it is one of the few faultless things not only in Shakespeare but in the whole of literature. I use the word literature here deliberately: for *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is almost too ethereally delicate, as at the other end of the scale *King Lear* is almost too gigantic and tremendous, to get within the bounds of concrete representation. It is, as its name purports, a dream. Its poetry is, more than almost any other poetry, articulate music. Indeed its musical quality is so eminent that many attempts have been made, of course with disastrous results, to convert it, or rather pervert it, into an opera. It may be presumed that some such perversion was what Pepys saw in September 1662 and noted in his *Diary* as 'the most insipid ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life'. It

has always lured musicians: among others, Purcell, Arne, and Bishop wrote music for parts of it, and Mendelssohn's overture has become, for stage-productions, almost a part of the play itself. But only Mozart could have interpreted into the language of another art its delicacy, its suavity, its certainty.

When printed in 1600, it is stated on the title-page to have been sundry times publicly acted. But it bears all the marks of having been primarily composed for private or semi-private performance at the celebration of a marriage in high life and probably in the Queen's presence; not therefore presented on the bald Elizabethan stage and in daylight, but under artificial light and with the elaborate mounting and decoration of a masque. The particular occasion is matter of conjecture. The choice seems to lie between the marriage of the Earl of Derby to Lady Elizabeth Vere on 26 January 1595, and with rather more probability (as pointed out by Sir Edmund Chambers) the marriage of Thomas, son of Lord Berkeley, to Elizabeth Carey on 15 February 1596. Both were celebrated in London, one at the Savoy, the other at Blackfriars. Elizabeth Carey was the Queen's god-daughter; and the allusion, in the list read out for choice to Theseus by his Master of the Revels, to Spenser's *Tears of the Muses* has been plausibly conjectured to have been suggested by the fact that Spenser's poem was dedicated to Elizabeth Carey's aunt, Lady Strange. Shakespeare himself had in 1594 a share in Lord Strange's company of actors. In either case, a further relevance and a new touch of beauty is given (and this still applies to modern performances) by the dream of midsummer being—

presented in midwinter. One would like to fancy that in the original performance the bride and bridegroom themselves took the parts of Hippolyta and Theseus, and that fairy-land melted away into the wedding night as it does in the play itself, 'by the dead and drowsy fire'.

The new Globe Theatre was under construction early in 1599 and was opened probably in May of that year. Shakespeare's advancement to an important share in its management seems to have spurred him to increased and unprecedented activity. He had wound up the series of his histories, and now turned his full powers on comedy. In a year or little more, the three great comedies, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *As You Like It*, and *Twelfth Night* were successively launched. They represent an ascending scale of mastery in the conjunction of comedy with romance. In *Much Ado about Nothing* there may still be felt a certain lack of cohesion between the two; the clear hard atmosphere of comedy (in which there is always something essentially cruel) shows up the preposterousness of a romantic plot to a degree which now and then becomes a little uncomfortable. *As You Like It* may be thought of as a fresh attempt at their fusion; the atmosphere has become more luminous, and no feeling is left that we are just on the edge of what would be pitiful or even in the full sense tragic: but in the reaction against the inconsequence of romance there is a trace of artificial neatness which leaves even the warmest admirers of the play with some sense of half-unconscious dissatisfaction. As we have already noticed with *The Merchant of Venice*, the dexterity and almost mechanical finish of

construction make the play tell more in representation than in reading; and these two plays are in fact more frequently revived on the stage than any, or almost any, of the other Shakespearian Comedies: partly because this quality in them attracts producers, partly because it is popular with audiences. Yet on this it may be noted—I owe this observation to Mr. Granville-Barker, to whom I am glad to have this opportunity of acknowledging my debt in this as in many other matters—that the 'well-made play' accords more with the genius of France and of the Latin races than with ours. The deep-seated English romanticism, the irrepressible English lyrical instinct, are averse from logic in the artistic no less than in the political and social sphere. It might be said of the English drama, as it has been said of the British Empire, that it was not made, but happened; that its structure was not planned, but grew; that it is a matter more of luck than of guidance. This however is a subject too large to enter upon: I only commend it to consideration. But in *Twelfth Night* the balance and adjustment, or rather the organic fusion, of these conflicting motives and opposed methods is triumphantly solved. It is Shakespeare's crowning achievement in comedy; central in his art, and in this field, final. In it the question of faultlessness does not arise. It is comedy made into music. The rhythm of the action is as satisfying as the cadence of the verse and the modulation of the prose. It is here, in the heart of the comedy, as the comedy is in the heart of Shakespeare's work, that there comes the loveliest of all English lyrics. It may be remembered how in Mr. Granville-Barker's production of

the play this touch was recognized and emphasized by a remarkable device of staging, the little scene set, like a jewel, inside the larger scene, and by the pause and silence that followed on the last notes of the song. But the play also opens and closes on music: from the 'play on' of the first line (so wonderfully re-echoed, so long after, by Keats) to the soft ballad-music of Feste's last song. The opening is, in Shakespeare, unique. Some of the earlier and cruder plays begin with a formal procession on to the stage which may or may not have had a musical accompaniment. But Shakespeare's regular practice is to open, either with a set speech of the nature of a prologue, or, more frequently and indeed habitually, with an introductory conversation, in a quiet tone, and of an explanatory purport. Here, and here only, the music is being played to silent listeners as the curtain rises, and sets the key-note for both speech and action. The close, the 'exeunt to music', was a regular and obviously effective stage device. But here it takes a completely new relevance and beauty. In it we seem to hear, as from a lighted room within, the wind and rain of that outer world from which we have been carried and to which we must return. Its dying fall, repeating the opening note, 'no more; 'tis not so sweet now as 'twas before', struck in Orsino's first speech, is like an *Écho du temps passé*; it has the same strange wistfulness. 'That's all one, our play is done; and we'll strive to please you every day.' Our play is done: so it was. *What you will* is the alternative title of *Twelfth Night*. Another call had come, or was coming. Shakespeare felt it and responded to it. To pure comedy, having brought it

to this consummation, he did not return. Here, as elsewhere, we see him taking up, at the mixed prompting of his own genius and of public demand, a particular form of dramatic art, putting into it through successive experiments all his own vitality, his own dramatic sense, his own technical skill; bringing it to perfection, such perfection at least as conditions allowed, and as satisfies our own utmost desire; and then leaving it, to explore and handle a new field. Tragedy was calling for him. A more trained and cultivated audience began to demand that the theatre should treat life more deeply and more gravely; and his own grasp of life, we may readily believe, was larger and firmer now that he was thirty-five, at the apex of the ascending arc of the human course. It is worth thinking of, that if Shakespeare had died at thirty-five, while we should be without the greater half of his achievement, while we should not know or suspect the heights to be reached, the depths to be plumbed, in the overwhelming mass of work that includes *Hamlet* and *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, he would still be the first name in English letters.

That position he would mainly occupy in virtue of his dramatic works. But our view and estimate of what we may call, for brevity, the first Shakespeare, would be incomplete if it did not take account of the poems. They are literature in its more precise meaning. To this earlier period belong the *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, published in 1593 and 1594; and within it, though actual dates are quite uncertain and are matter of acute and even heated controversy,

were written the greater number (though not in my opinion all or nearly all) of the Sonnets which stole into the world so mysteriously in 1609. These and likewise the few other short poems attributed to him have to be regarded in connexion with one another. But it will be more convenient to isolate the two published poems for the moment and say something about them, reserving what has to be said about the approach to the Sonnets for later consideration.

Venus and Adonis is called by Shakespeare himself, in the dedication of the poem to the Earl of Southampton, 'the first heir of my invention', and in the dedication to him of *Lucrece* a year later he speaks of 'my untutored lines'. As a matter of fact the former was the first work of his which he, so to speak, formally legitimized by publishing it under his own name; and it is not a little remarkable that he never afterwards throughout his whole life published a line. To the publication of the plays which were printed as quartos during his life he may be supposed in some cases at least to have given his consent, but it is clear that he never took pains over it or concerned himself with it much. In what circumstances the Sonnets were published we shall presumably never know. Theories are multitudinous; they take every possible ground between the two extreme positions, that he prepared them for that publication himself, and that he succeeded in having the volume suppressed soon after it was published: this last theory has at least this much to be said for it, that it would explain how this collection of wonderful poetry attracted—which is certain—but little notice, either then or for long afterwards. But both *Venus and*

Adonis and *Lucrece* passed through edition after edition, and the former, at least, was immensely popular. Over its production he clearly took pains: this is established by the remarkable correctness of the printing. The eccentric spellings here and there in it are almost beyond doubt those of his own autograph; and it may be noticed in passing that they are of considerable value towards textual criticism of the plays which went to the printers of the First Folio in manuscripts written in Shakespeare's own hand. Apart from these, from some slightly erratic punctuation, and from a few words, only half a dozen or so, in which conjectural emendation suggests itself, there are in the original issue of a poem of nearly 1,200 lines not more than five or six misprints, and indeed not more than three or four cases in which a misprint seems certain. He meant this first heir of his invention to make his name, to be his certificate of enrolment in the ranks of the English poets.

As usual, whatever he did he did well. As usual, he did not invent or innovate. He went with the stream, and took it at the flood. He habitually took up the inventions of others; but he handled them with an ease, a fluency, a mastery that were wholly his own. By *Venus and Adonis* he acquired popularity at a single stroke. Its sensuousness appealed, it was meant to appeal, to wide audiences, not to the established critics and censors. 'The younger sort', was Gabriel Harvey's acid comment, 'take much delight in it.' Its fluency and melodiousness, the 'honey-flowing vein' as it was aptly called a few years later by Barnfield, were overwhelming and are

still amazing. In metre and method it is pretty closely modelled on Lodge's *Scilla*, but it leaves Lodge hopelessly behind. It is not great poetry. But every now and then the 'idle overhandled theme' (to use its own words) blazes into incomparable splendour: in single lines:

> Leading him prisoner in a red-rose chain—
> That inward beauty and invisible—
> Shone like the moon in water seen by night—

or with an ampler cadence in couplets and periods that prelude the richer and more fully orchestrated harmonies of the Sonnets:

> And so in spite of death thou dost survive
> In that thy likeness still is left alive—
>
> What dost thou mean,
> To stifle beauty and to steal his breath
> Who when he lived, his breath and beauty set
> Gloss on the rose, smell to the violet?—
>
> Her voice is stopp'd, her joints forget to bow,
> Her eyes are mad that they have wept till now.

That last line, it may be noted, is an instance of the astonishing musical effects that Shakespeare can get out of a run of monosyllables; his use of the monosyllabic line, from first to last, deserves and repays close attention from all students of the art of language.

There are many anticipations, both here and in *Lucrece*, of turns of thought and motives afterwards put by Shakespeare to dramatic use; and the likeness and contrast both repay study. One instance may be given in illustration; it is of peculiar interest because the interval between the two treatments is

not much short of twenty years. The elaborated or 'long-tailed' simile—a device which first meets us, already full-grown, in Homer, and which was re-introduced into modern European poetry by Dante—may be employed in many ways and for many purposes. Here is one in *Venus and Adonis*, where it is purely ornamental, in keeping with the tone of the poem, which is throughout loaded with rich ornament:

> As one on shore
> Gazing upon a late-embarked friend,
> Till the wild waves will have him seen no more,
> Whose ridges with the meeting clouds contend.

This is a Dantesque simile, both in the straightforward directness of the first two lines and in the amplification of the third. Drama has no use for such ornament. We find the motive of this simile put to a new value and developed in Shakespeare's latest manner, in the dialogue between Imogen and Pisanio:

> And was that all?
> —No, madam; for so long
> As he could make me with this eye or ear
> Distinguish him from others, he did keep
> The deck, with glove or hat or handkerchief
> Still waving, as the fits and stirs of 's mind
> Could best express how slow his soul sail'd on,
> How swift his ship.
> —Thou shouldst have made him
> As little as a crow, or less, ere left
> To after-eye him.
> —Madam, so I did.

—I would have broke mine eye-strings, crack'd them, but
To look upon him, till the diminution
Of space had pointed him sharp as my needle;
Nay, followed him till he had melted from
The smallness of a gnat to air; and then
Have turn'd mine eye, and wept.

The detail is more profuse than ever, and much sharper. But now it is dramatic, and every word tells. When we compare the two methods, we are studying Shakespeare as literature.

A year after the publication of *Venus and Adonis*, the London theatres being closed for some months for the plague, and nothing doing in the theatrical world, Shakespeare followed up his first adventure into authorship with *Lucrece*. Again he adapts his poem to what was in current vogue, modelling it, even more closely than he had modelled *Venus and Adonis* on Lodge, on Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond*. Not much less than twice the length of its predecessor (1,855 lines against the 1,194 of *Venus and Adonis*), it bears all the marks of being written with unfaltering ease and at high speed. As much as anything of Shakespeare's, it makes one realize his mastery of copious language, his melodiousness, his fluent wealth and superflux of imagery. They culminate in the gorgeous and redundant rhetoric of Lucrece's long tirade with the apostrophes to Night, Time, and Opportunity, which fills no less than thirty-nine stanzas. *Sufflaminandus erat*, 'the brake ought to have been put on him', the acid comment of Jonson, applies with full justice to both these poems. Their importance, beyond what must be conceded to their own beauties (rather that than their own beauty), lies

in the isolation on a large scale of that lyrical quality which is native to the English temper, which is prominent in the whole work of the Elizabethan age, and which in Shakespeare from first to last instinctively seeks for expression. In much of his dramatic work, alike in the Comedies, the Histories, and the Tragedies, it had to be banked down. We have already noticed how it surges up irrepressibly in *Richard II*, and how it permeates, where for once full scope is given to it, the whole substance of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. Long afterwards, its diffused radiance in the romances is no less remarkable and even more wonderful.

So far, I have traversed very summarily the field of approach to Shakespeare up to the point at which the transition from the first to the second Shakespeare takes place. I have endeavoured to indicate landmarks in it, to trace the large lines of its development; not by way of scientific analysis or of dogmatic conclusions, but of suggestion, and as I hope stimulation, towards further and more detailed study. One caution I may be allowed at this point to repeat: when speaking or thinking of the transition, of the distinction between the sixteenth-century Elizabethan and the seventeenth-century Jacobean Shakespeare, we must never for a moment lose sight of, or loosen our grasp on, the fact that the first and the second Shakespeare are a single artist working in a single art: that the Shakespeare Canon is a single world. The approach to Shakespeare may be made, as I have taken pains to insist, in many ways. What is essential is that it should be made not from one angle alone, and that it should be founded on a

broad basis of intimacy, broad without being discontinuous or superficial. On that basis the structure of Shakespearian scholarship is to be built up; from that prepared and fertilized soil the harvests of scholarship are to be reaped and brought home. In the noble words of Pope, no less true than noble, Shakespeare 'is not so much an imitator as an instrument of Nature, and 'tis not so just to say he speaks from her, as that she spoke through him'. In handling literature it is allowable to quote from the classics. I would suggest as a motto for more advanced studies the famous lines of Lucretius, in which you may substitute if you will the word Shakespeare for the word Nature:

> alid ex alio clarescet, nec tibi caeca
> nox iter eripiet quin ultima naturai
> pervideas: ita res accendent lumina rebus.

'One thing will grow clear out of another, and blind night will not snatch the track from you until you see Shakespeare through to the last verge: so will things kindle light for things.'

IV

THE DECADE OF THE TRAGEDIES

We have seen Shakespeare through his apprenticeship, and through the period of his entering into full possession of the fields of history and comedy. A pause follows, and then his dramatic work takes another direction. He responds to a new call and passes into a new sphere. In the last year of the sixteenth century the summons of tragedy came. The decade which follows is throughout under tragic control; the production of the great tragedies may be placed within a somewhat shorter central period, the seven years 1602–8. That septennate, already noted as a convenient period of delimitation, may be usefully kept in mind, for guidance rather than for any exact definition. It is the greatest age of the English drama; and one of the greatest in the literature of the world.

The transition from *Twelfth Night* to *Julius Caesar* is startling in its swiftness and completeness.

> He was dispos'd to mirth, but on the sudden
> A Roman thought hath struck him:

he starts afresh, and at first with a curiously tentative handling, as of an artist who feels himself to be once more a beginner. What he has done hitherto is, as it were, written off. It takes a new aspect under the reflected light of the new period with its depth and vastness: the plays of the previous decade recede, and are felt to have in some sense become prologues to the swelling act of the imperial theme. All at once we are in a new world. The last echoes of the song to which the curtain falls as the stage of *Twelfth Night* empties have hardly died away, when the trumpets sound over Rome.

Julius Caesar, an exploratory and tentative piece of construction in the new sphere, prefaces the Tragedies; then, after a considerable interval, or so it seems, the majestic procession enters: *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*. What a roll of names, what a pageant of sombre magnificences!

Of the four great tragedies (universally recognized as such) dated between 1602 and 1606, it is needless to say much, as it is impossible to say anything that has not been said already; especially after Mr. Bradley's masterly intensive study, which is recognized as a classic of Shakespearian interpretation. But one point of general import deserves particular notice: the contrast between the intense concentration and compression in *Othello* and *Macbeth*, and the voluminousness, the gigantic expansion, in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. In the two former, this compression is carried, with extreme and successful daring, to its utmost limit. In *Macbeth*—unless, as has been suggested with what is at least superficial probability, Act I as we possess it has only come down in a mutilated stage-version—the scene is set and the situation developed with what seems like reckless speed. Notwithstanding the insertion of the long scene in Act IV between Malcolm and Macduff with the irrelevant episode describing the touching for the King's evil, it is the shortest and swiftest of the tragedies; and even with this insertion the whole play is only half the length of *Hamlet*. That scene, almost certainly composed, or at the least largely expanded, for a court performance, retards the action and almost brings it to a stand; in reading and in

stage-performance alike, this is felt. In *Othello*, a similar concentration is gained at the cost of those flagrant inconsistencies in the story which have been the vexation of commentators, and which they have vainly tried to ignore or to explain away. They were no doubt deliberately incurred, and require no further justification than their success. On the other hand, in *Hamlet* and *King Lear* the action is expanded to the utmost limit of what the stage will bear; even, it has been thought, beyond that limit, but in totality of impression with a success equally great. We may pause for a moment to consider this. 'The dramatist', it has been said of Hamlet, 'often forgot the theatre as he worked at the character, and the play became inordinately reflective and inordinately long.' If there is one thing certain about Shakespeare it is that he never forgot the theatre, unless in the sense in which we forget the air we breathe. That *Hamlet* is inordinately reflective is not, I think, the impression left by it on either readers or audiences, but only on critics. The impression it makes on the unsophisticated mind is in fact quite the contrary; it is of crowded incident and continuously breathless interest, which the soliloquies do not in fact interrupt but rather reinforce, and in which the only undramatic or irrelevant scene is the discussion in Act II, Sc. ii of the acting of plays by companies of children. This might be called, in the strict sense, an interpolation; like the passage in *Macbeth* to which I have just alluded, it had only an occasional relevance, and has lost its interest with the occasion. That *Hamlet* is immensely long is true: but will any one seriously say that it ought to be, or that he wishes it were, shorter?

Its length was not against it for an Elizabethan audience. Whether in fact it was even then ever played in full at any one performance there are no means of knowing certainly. But those who have had the rare privilege of seeing it acted in its entirety know how much it gains from that, how its continuity tells, how its current sweeps along in full volume. The Globe was closed for eleven months during the plague of 1603–4, and Shakespeare very likely then spent part of his time in rehandling *Hamlet* and writing fresh scenes either to be added or to replace others, as might best suit convenience at future performances.

On the matter of length, the 'two hours traffic of our stage' was not taken seriously as a limit whether by playwrights, by acting companies, or by audiences. To take the Shakespearian drama alone, the length of the plays ranges from 3,964 lines, in the modern notation, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, to 1770 in *The Comedy of Errors*. There are various methods of computation, particularly in the numbering of prose lines, but they do not differ in general result very seriously. I give Mr. Morton Luce's figures; they are based on the same method, and are accordingly consistent with one another for purposes of comparison.

Tragedies tend to be longer than comedies; but this is no rule, for *Macbeth* with its 1,993 lines is only two-thirds the length of *As You Like It*. Nor is length a matter of earlier or later date. At one end of the series, practically contemporary with the 1,770 lines of *The Comedy of Errors* is the revised version of *Love's Labour's Lost* with 2,789. At the other end,

practically contemporary likewise, we have the 2,068 lines of *The Tempest*, as against the 3,448 of *Cymbeline*. But the point to observe as regards the longer and the shorter tragedies is, that the difference in length does not (as is sometimes thoughtlessly assumed) correspond to a difference in rapidity of action. The rapidity of action in *Hamlet*—and still more conspicuously in *King Lear*, with one exception—is very great. It is a question of abbreviation or extension of the rapid movement, not of the rapidity of the movement itself.

The exception in *King Lear* which I mentioned is the prodigious tripartite scene of the storm on the heath at the central point of the play: in our notation, scenes ii, iv, and vi of Act III. In effect they are one immensely long scene, broken up by the brief intercalated scenes between Edmund and Gloster (sc. iii) and Edmund and Cornwall (sc. v). The action of the drama, in the ordinary sense of action as progressive movement, is in this scene almost wholly suspended; nothing material happens. The movement is, like that of the storm in which the scene is placed, cyclonic. On the immensity of its atmosphere it would be idle to waste words. On the mechanized modern stage it becomes impossible; and even in reading, when read evenly and continuously, it drags. To bring out its massed and confused effect it has to be syncopated and taken at great speed. Like the storm, it is less a series of happenings than a crowded turmoil of overlapping rolls of thunder and interlacing flickers of lightning. If it be not too paradoxical, one might say that this syncopation, to get its full effect, would have to be

effected by two or more of the five persons who are on the stage after Lear, Kent, and the Fool have been joined by Edgar and Gloster, speaking at once: hardly otherwise can we give effect to the immense orchestration, the colour and construction of which we can perhaps only realize, and then imperfectly, in the impression, at once confused and vivid, which it leaves on our mind after it is over. Before passing from *King Lear*, I would invite notice to a point in it of great structural and dramatic significance which has not, I think, received adequate notice. This is the part taken in it by Albany. He is generally thought of as only on the second plane of the drama, and as of little importance. Really, he is the pivot on which it all turns. He is central, inasmuch as he is the one character in the whole play who is from first to last completely sane, balanced, and normal. Sparing of words, unhurried and even slow in action, he is never either confused or hustled; and he can strike, when the time comes, with unhesitating certainty. He is present in the opening scene; but except for three words, the 'Dear Sir, forbear', addressed to Lear at the height of his passion and unheard or unheeded by him, he is a silent spectator. In Act I, Sc. iv, now in his own house, he enters at the height of the stormy scene between Lear and Goneril. Both sweep him aside and ignore him. To his quiet:

> My lord, I am guiltless as I am ignorant
> Of what hath moved you

Lear only tosses back 'It may be so, my lord,' and turns fiercely back on Goneril; and when Lear has rushed out raving, Goneril meets her husband's

question, 'Now gods that we adore, whereof comes this?' with the chilling and contemptuous, 'Never afflict yourself to know the cause'. He has, as yet, a real affection for her; he makes a quiet attempt to bring her to her senses:

> I cannot be so partial, Goneril,
> To the great love I bear you—

he slowly begins; but before he can even finish the sentence, Goneril flashes out at him: 'Pray you, content', and calls for her steward. Oswald dispatched with the letters to Regan, she turns back, a little quieted, to Albany, sneers under a mask of politeness at his 'milky gentleness', and in almost so many words calls him a fool. He takes this unmoved. When words are useless, he will not waste them, and on his brief but significant 'Well, well; the event', the scene closes.

During Acts II and III, in which horror accumulates on horror, and insanity in one form or another spreads like a fire, Albany disappears altogether. But he has been observing and thinking: and in Act IV, when the situation is drawing towards a crisis, his reappearance, carefully prepared for by the account given of him to Goneril by the steward, brings the first breath of air into the nightmare of darkness in which we have been moving. For the first time, he speaks out; but with complete self-control. Even Goneril's taunts—she is in the flush of her parting from Edmund—do not stir him to any answering violence. 'O vain fool!' she screams at him. It is she who is the fool. Her last outburst 'Marry, your manhood now!' slides off him

unreplied to, almost unheard: for just then, the messenger bursts in with his appalling news of what had passed in Gloster's castle. In a few rapid questions, Albany possesses himself of the whole situation. Now he has made up his mind. But he will not act yet; there is other business on hand, and he will be sure before he strikes.

In the British camp, before the battle (Act V, Sc. i) he is severely practical. The joint forces must do their work first. To Edmund he is coldly polite; Goneril he simply ignores. But at the end of the scene Edgar, in disguise, hands him Goneril's intercepted letter; and now he is fully armed, and takes his measures. In the last scene he is risen to his full stature; still the same, yet somehow transfigured. His very first words (they are spoken to Edmund) have in their quiet phrasing an accent of conscious yet unaffected dignity, of secure command. Edmund, just on the edge as he thinks of his complete triumph, suddenly feels the ground slipping from under him; he is for a moment, and for the first time, disconcerted and struck silent. The fierce alternation of thrust and parry between the two sisters is uninterrupted until Goneril's last venomous thrust—a few minutes earlier, she had given the poison to her sister —'mean you to enjoy him?' makes Albany, recognizing her existence, as it were, for the first time in the scene, turn on her with a single biting sentence, 'The let-alone lies not in your good will'. With a last desperate flash of bravado, Edmund retorts, 'Nor in thine, lord'. Then, in three words—no more are needed—'Half-blooded fellow, yes'—Albany pierces the iridescent bubble that had been, from the opening

of the play till now, floating so easily and expanding so irresistibly: the house of cards that Edmund has built up collapses and lies in ruins. He has only now to face his death, with a flicker of dying remorse mixing in his last sarcasm. The end of the whole matter follows swiftly. Lear and his three daughters all lie dead. Cornwall, Gloster, Edmund, Oswald are dead; Kent is dying. The slate is wiped clean. Albany is left in absolute power; and in the last lines of the play, he takes up, in a few simple words, the burden of the kingdom.

Iago knew that Emilia was a stupid woman; he left her out of account. Edmund thought that Albany was a stupid man; he left him out of account. On that one mistake, on that single defect of human insight, their adroit and complicated and successful schemes of villany crashed like an egg-shell. It is the fate of cleverness. It might be called the moral of *Othello* and *King Lear*. But it is not the moral of Shakespeare, for Shakespeare draws no morals; it is the moral of life.

The four lesser tragedies, *Julius Cæsar*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*, all present features—and as regards *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*, also present problems—of their own. Nor is *Julius Cæsar* without its problem, complex, and perhaps not certainly soluble. It is the earliest of the tragedies, and so far as dates can be fixed with some approximation to certainty, is the only extant drama produced by Shakespeare during the period of between two and three years which apparently separates *Twelfth Night* from *Hamlet*. That prodigious change of axis could not, even with Shakespeare, be made

at once. *Julius Cæsar* gives the impression of Shakespeare working tentatively in the exploration and handling of the new medium. Such impressions are not always trustworthy, and easily become fanciful; yet they are based upon an instinct, or divination, which it would be unwise to ignore. Great artists, and their work, call not only for scholarly study, but for the exercise of our own imagination at its highest pitch. Receptivity is the first requirement, as it is in the end the last; but the saying of Coleridge that 'we receive but what we give' is also one side of the truth. *Julius Cæsar*, standing as it does at the point of separation (or if we prefer to put it so, at the point of junction) between two worlds, has perhaps been thought of too much as a precursor of *Hamlet*, too little as a successor of the chronicle-histories. Its very name, though no other could well have been given to it, is a compromise. It is on the edge of becoming, but has not quite become, a tragedy in the full sense, the Tragedy of Brutus. There is something about it, in spite of all the efforts which have been made to vindicate its structural unity, that can only be described as sketchy: and indeed the conjecture has been advanced, not without plausibility, that it is in fact a reconstructed conflation of two pieces, the former of the two ending on the death of Cæsar, the latter on the death of Brutus. It does not of course follow that these plays actually existed, still less that they had been written by other dramatists and were used by Shakespeare as material for his own; but only that they existed in Shakespeare's workshop, that is to say, in his own mind, a workshop into which we cannot enter, a mind at whose work-

ings we can only guess. But if in one sense or another they existed, these would be tragedies in the older, the Chaucerian, and early Elizabethan sense attached to the word, '*casus virorum illustrium*'.

> Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie
> As olde bokes maken us memorie
> Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
> And is yfallen out of heigh degree
> Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly;
> And they been versifyed comunly.

That last line of Chaucer's is a bare explanatory note, a fact casually mentioned. But the fact implies a great truth; that the tension and awfulness of tragedy not merely call for poetry to express them, but require poetry to make them bearable.

Tragedy, in this formal and restricted sense of the term, had in fact been a favourite dramatic form in the previous generation, and was not wholly swept up into a larger movement. In *Julius Cæsar*, at all events, the transformation of chronicle-history into tragedy has not been fully wrought out. The extreme divergences among competent critics with regard to the presentation of Cæsar himself are an index of what we must, for once, judge to be an uncertainty in Shakespeare's handling. It is worth noticing that Cæsar is mentioned in no less than twelve of the twenty-one plays of his Canon which are anterior to this, and generally, though not always, with a touch of mingled admiration and awe. To speak of this as being an obsession would be extravagant, or absurd; but perhaps it is not wholly fanciful to suggest that when he came to place 'the foremost man of all this world' upon the stage he felt himself in unsounded

waters, and in face of something more than human. Something of this feeling seems to recur, a little later, in the thrill and depth of the famous passage in *Hamlet* beginning:

> In the most high and palmy state of Rome
> A little ere the mightiest Julius fell.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* it has disappeared.

The next two of the four, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*, are both queer and perplexing plays. Of the former it ought to be noted that while there is some foundation for the condemnation that has been passed on it as 'history without truth, comedy without laughter, and tragedy without pathos', the first charge is irrelevant, and both the second and the third require qualification. It is of high value as an illustration of Shakespeare's methods, and from this point of view at least, though from others as well, repays the most careful attention. Both these plays are the more perplexing because they force on a reader (whether on a spectator I cannot say, for I have never seen either upon the stage) the problem of mixed authorship in an acute form. They are, together with *Measure for Measure*—which, it is important to note, is dated with high probability between them—the three Shakespearian plays which we can call disagreeable; some would go further, and say, which we must call disagreeable. In such a judgement, it should perhaps be added, *Titus Andronicus* is ignored as unjustifiably included in the Canon, and *All's Well that Ends Well* is left out of account as too insubstantial—too filmy—to be disagreeable. To draw a further inference from this, and to say that they reflect a mood of bitterness and

disillusion through which Shakespeare was himself passing in these years, is of course wholly illegitimate. It is in effect saying that Shakespeare, whenever he does not suit our taste, ceases to be a dramatist. 'They that level at my offences, reckon up their own.' No such theory has been started about Chapman, the probable collaborator, if there is any collaboration, in both plays; nor would it have been started about Shakespeare either, but for the raging curiosity of critics to wring Shakespeare's secret out of him and find thinly-veiled autobiography (if scandalous, so much the better) in his dramatic work. It is more to the point to regard *Troilus and Cressida* so far as it is Shakespeare's work (and I think it is, at the least, nearly all Shakespeare's work) as in some sense the by-product or backwash of the great masterpiece of *Hamlet*, and *Timon of Athens*, so far as it is Shakespeare's work (and I think that while there is a good case for supposing collaboration, much more of it is Shakespeare's work than is usually conceded to him) as, similarly, the by-product or backwash of the even more gigantic masterpiece of *King Lear*. It would be interesting but perhaps over-fanciful to pursue this further, and to trace in the portraiture of Cressida unused material from the workshop where Ophelia was created; and in the portraiture of Timon, unused material from what had been assembled for the creation of Lear. Another point about *Timon of Athens* which is interesting, both in itself and in its bearing on the supposed collaboration of Chapman in its production, is that it is unique in the Canon as being not merely without any feminine interest, but except for the single scene in which the two harlots, Phrynia

and Timandra, are brought on with Alcibiades and given some four dozen words to say between them, merely in order to make an opportunity for Timon to launch his most tremendous tirade, being without any female character at all.

Coriolanus, the last of the eight tragedies which we have been passing under review, is also the simplest —I use the word simple in the sense given to it by Aristotle in the *Poetics*—the most austere, and the least intricate in construction. It shows what may be alternatively described as the shrinkage or the concentration of the tragic impulse. It is in effect the study of a single character, brought into high relief, round which the other figures of the drama are grouped with masterly skill. It presents no technical or psychological problems: it is a simple action nobly treated and kept unusually free from underplot or irrelevancies. Compared with its predecessors it is almost quiet in tone, almost classic in sculpturesque quality and dignity. It is lit up by familiar touches here and there, windows that let in the common daylight; it is sustained by exalted rhetoric. But it is swept by no storm of passion; it is precipitated by no unexpected stroke of fate. It proceeds majestically, smoothly, inevitably on its course, and in its conclusion evokes grave pity, but not tragic terror. In its conduct we can trace the manner, in one or two of the scenes we can suspect the actual hand, of the younger colleague now associated with Shakespeare in management and about to succeed him as head dramatist of the company.

An insensible change was passing over the theatre, or over the character of the audience which ulti-

mately determines what the theatre shall supply. The association of Fletcher and Beaumont, 'the great twin brethren of the single wreath', began in 1607. It opened a new age, that of the Jacobean romantic drama, which held the stage for a generation. To this movement, as to those which had preceded it, Shakespeare henceforth associates himself; at lower tension, but with unimpaired suavity, flexibility, and mastery. In Beaumont—whose early death at the age of thirty, a few weeks before Shakespeare's own, 'eclipsed at his high noon' in the words of Sir Aston Cokayne's commemorative verses, was an irreparable loss to the English drama—he must have felt a genius that, though on a lower plane, was cognate to his own; and in Fletcher a copious facility that, within its limits, could always be depended on. The turning-point may be placed at the production, in 1608, of the romance of *Philaster*. It captivated the public; it made the fame of its joint authors; and it deflected the current of the drama decisively. After the production and the triumph of *Philaster*—this is said subject to what will be added immediately—Shakespeare produces no more tragedies. The period of concentration and high tension was ending. Romance held the field. Tragedies indeed continued to be produced, some of them minor masterpieces: Webster's *Duchess of Malfy* in the year of Shakespeare's death; Massinger's *Duke of Milan* in the year of the publication of the First Folio. These and others fall in the reign of James, but ten years later still, when the Caroline had definitely replaced the Jacobean age, we have Ford's *Broken Heart*. But even in these, and markedly in the whole of tragic

production, there is a loosening of texture, a romantic deliquescence. The tragic drama becomes melodramatic, or sentimental, or both. On the stage it gradually dwindled away into the so-called domestic tragedy of the eighteenth century, introduced into its full career by Rowe in *The Fair Penitent* in 1703. Otherwise, it became (as Attic tragedy had similarly become in the fourth century B.C.) an academic literary exercise. The day—or shall we call it the starry and splendid night?—of tragedy was over.

But before he turned from it, Shakespeare left as it were upon its grave a final and magnificent memorial. With that, we may feel him saying to himself, in that extraordinarily simple language of which he had the secret, conveying profound emotion with miraculous poignancy and complete certainty,

> — On:
> Things that are past are done with me.

Nine short, common, prose words in prose order! With these—it is the sort of thing which even more than all his abundance and all his magnificence makes one ready to kneel and worship him—he can transfigure and in Dante's apt word 'transhumanize' human speech. The words come—I wonder how many readers will have already recognized and identified them—in the play which we must pause here to place and consider, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

The play of *Antony and Cleopatra*, I said, using a purposely colourless word. No term describes it fully. It is a tragedy, but it is more than that. It carries further, and to its extreme limit, that immense expansion both of base and of superstructure which

Shakespeare had employed in *King Lear*. We might apply to it with justice the term, often carelessly flung about or thoughtlessly misused, of a super-tragedy or super-drama. Its field is the world; the *orbis Romanus*, the world which was coextensive with the Roman Empire and with what was known as civilization. And it is the longest of all the plays in the Canon; longer even than the combined text of *Hamlet*, and much longer than any of the others. In the long-established division of Shakespeare's plays into scenes—which though a post-Shakespearian convention, is useful and not negligible—it fills no less than 42 scenes, as against the 18 of *Julius Cæsar* and the 20 of *Hamlet*: even *King Lear* with all its immensity has only 26. Rome and Alexandria, or more largely, Italy and Egypt, are its two pivots, round which are grouped the occidental and the oriental world. But we find ourselves transported, in the sweep of the world-movement, to Greece, to Sicily, to Epirus, to a camp far out on the Syrian desert, to a galley on the Tyrrhene sea. Yet for the reader, and as much or more so for the spectator when the play is not presented (as it nearly always is) in a seriously mutilated form, the immensity of its stage, the clash of fleets and armies, the events which determined the history of civilization for a thousand years, are felt to be in their place as a background; they do not blur or diminish, they actually bring out more intensely and vividly the two human figures after whom the drama is named. What confidence in his own mastery, what miraculous power, to have created this vast solidly constructed background and yet to have kept it as a background, with seemingly

effortless ease! It is the tragedy not of the Roman world, but of Antony and Cleopatra: and of both of them equally. Only in two other plays, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Troilus and Cressida*, have we this duplication of the central figure which places two figures in equipoise. It is true that *Much Ado About Nothing* was alternatively called, at least in popular usuage, 'Benedick and Beatrice'. But it is obvious that 'Hamlet and Ophelia', or even 'Othello and Desdemona', would be quite inappropriate titles for *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Here, neither single name gives the central tone to the drama; Antony does not exist for the sake of Cleopatra (as one might put it), nor does Cleopatra exist for the sake of Antony: they are two immense and in a sense equivalent forces which never coalesce, and the interaction between them is the drama. This suggests another point in Shakespeare's management of it, not less remarkable and I think less noticed. This is the dramatic or constructive importance of a figure on the second plane of the action, that of Enobarbus. It comes out more clearly on the stage than in reading. But in either, if we miss it, we miss the effect of the drama in its totality; our interest tends to be distracted between Antony and Cleopatra as human beings on the one hand, and on the other hand, the vast world-tragedy in which they are swept along and finally swept away. The subtlety, the adroitness, the fertility of Shakespeare's craftsmanship are at their full stretch in Enobarbus, and bear the strain triumphantly. He is much more than a sort of Greek chorus interpreting and commenting on the action; he is something quite different from the Ulysses of

Troilus and Cressida, the man with no illusions who keeps his head and his heart alike perfectly cool and detached. On his first appearance he may give that impression; but his so-called cynicism is only a protective outer garment. He dies at last of a broken heart, and when he dies, there is nothing left but the end. If we could think him away from the play—though perhaps that is impossible—we should find it falling to pieces. 'Think, and die', his brief but sufficient answer to Cleopatra's 'What shall we do, Enobarbus?' flashes a final light on him, and not only on him, but on the whole drama.

So concludes the series of Shakespeare's tragedies. As with comedy ten years earlier, he had brought tragedy to its summit. There was nothing more to do. With the same swift, acquiescent, magnificent ease he now turns to the new movement. Tragedy was a task which was accomplished, a load which he had brought home and laid down:

> There, sir, stop:
> Let us not burden our remembrance with
> A heaviness that's gone.

To the period of the tragedies and, as nearly as we can estimate, just about its centre, belongs that singular and enigmatic play, *Measure for Measure*. Technically it is classed (with how much or how little substantial justice we need not take great pains to enquire) as a comedy: but nothing could be less of a comedy in anything but the purely technical sense. Yet neither is it a tragedy; and still less if possible is it a romance. The plot might have lent itself to romantic treatment; but that treatment Shakespeare was not able, or did not choose, to apply to it. It

ought, one is tempted to think, to have been a tragedy; it is almost on the edge of being one. With its tenseness, its thunderous atmosphere, its glimpses into the abyss, and the great scene in the central Act which sounds the depths of terror and pity, it is essentially cast in the tragic mould. To its horror and squalor—one need not mince words about them—neither the lighter scenes nor the so-called happy ending bring any relief. To the reader, at least, it gives, more than any other play of Shakespeare's, the feeling that he is handling a theme which if it is to be handled thus is intractable. Yet he treats it with the marvellous stage-sense, the constructional sleight-of-hand, on which he can always rely to bring him out of tight places, and on the stage, the illusion is such that the play is much less painful and almost ceases to be disagreeable. The jar of the grinding brakes on the very verge of the catastrophe towards which the action has been tending is hardly felt. The production of the piece may possibly have been a task imposed on him; it may more probably be the result of an impatience with the terribly exacting demands of tragedy. It may even be an experiment, for Shakespeare is always experimenting. If so, it was one which he never repeated, and which we may imagine he had not much inclination to repeat. It was in the new movement and by new methods that further expansion was to be found, and the superstructure placed on the fabric of his creation.

The new movement had been already anticipated in the scenes which Shakespeare wrote into *Pericles*. It was produced at the Globe—the Blackfriars with its increased facilities for the production of romantic

dramas did not come into use by Shakespeare's company for two years more—in the spring of 1608. It was printed soon after, and was repeatedly reprinted before the publication of the First Folio, always with ascription of the authorship to Shakespeare. Why it was excluded from the Canon when, for instance, *Titus and Andronicus* was included, is not clear; there is more than one plausible explanation, but into this question we need not here enter. It is of peculiar interest as giving us, for once, a glimpse into Shakespeare's workshop. The slipshod chronicle-romance which was put into his hands for revision and alteration was, as a work of art, negligible. Wilkins (there seems no reason to doubt that he was responsible for it) was merely a second-rate or third-rate hack-writer. But it marked a turn of the tide in the matter of public demand and the adaptation of drama towards it. We may notice in passing, that its action, like that of *The Winter's Tale*, extends over some sixteen years: in this connexion, the chorus-prologue to Act IV of *The Winter's Tale* is of much significance. Shakespeare clearly found the task he had undertaken attractive, both as opening up a new experiment, and also very likely as a relief from tragic pressure; and he carried it, perhaps beyond his first intention, much further than usual. He left the first two Acts pretty much, if not entirely, as they stood, but rewrote practically the whole of the rest. No thrill in the whole of Shakespeare is greater than that felt when after ploughing through Acts I and II and the chorus-prologue of Act III, the full swell of the incomparable Shakespearian verse bursts on us with: 'Thou God of this great vast, rebuke these surges'.

From this point onwards, some patches of the original are left—and they are poor and flat enough—but the whole movement is Shakespearianized. Even in the scenes in the brothel at Mitylene, the supple elastic prose shows the master-hand: one has only to think of how Fletcher, for instance, would have handled them to be sure of this. The recognition scene in Act V is unsurpassed—one sometimes is inclined to say, unequalled—for sheer perfection of beauty in the whole of Shakespeare's work. It is better to read it than to talk about it; I will only quote, without comment, part of the dialogue between Pericles and Marina:

> —I am a maid,
> My lord, that ne'er before invited eyes,
> But have been gaz'd on like a comet: she speaks,
> My lord, that may be hath endured a grief
> Might equal yours, if both were justly weighed.
> Though wayward fortune did malign my state,
> My derivation was from ancestors
> Who stood equivalent with mighty kings;
> But time hath rooted out my parentage
> And to the world and awkward casualties
> Bound me in servitude.—I will desist:
> But there is something glows upon my cheek
> And whispers in mine ear, 'Go not till he speak.'
>
> My fortunes—parentage—good parentage—
> To equal mine—was it not thus? what say you?
>
> I said, my lord, if you did know my parentage
> You would not do me violence.
>
> I do think so. Pray you, turn your eyes upon me.
> You are like something that—What countrywoman?
> Here, of these shores?

No, nor of any shores:
Yet I was mortally brought forth, and am
No other than I appear.

I am great with woe, and shall deliver weeping.
My dearest wife was like this maid, and such a one
My daughter might have been: my queen's square brows;
Her stature to an inch; as wand-like straight;
As silver-voiced: her eyes as jewel-like
And cased as richly; in face another Juno:
Who starves the ears she feeds, and makes them hungry
The more she gives them speech. Where do you live?

Where I am but a stranger: from the deck
You may discern the place.

Where were you bred?
And how achieved you these endowments which
You make more rich to owe?

If I should tell
My history, it would seem like lies
Disdain'd in the reporting.

Prythee, speak.
Falseness cannot come from thee, for thou look'st
Modest as Justice, and thou seem'st a palace
For the crown'd Truth to dwell in. I'll believe thee
And make my senses credit thy relation
To points that seem impossible: for thou look'st
Like one I loved indeed. . . . I think thou said'st
Thou hadst been toss'd from wrong to injury,
And that thou thought'st thy griefs might equal mine
If both were opened.

Some such thing
I said, and said no more but what my thoughts
Did warrant me was likely.

> Tell thy story.
> If thine, consider'd, prove the thousandth part
> Of my endurance, thou art a man, and I
> Have suffer'd like a girl: yet thou dost look
> Like Patience gazing on kings' graves, and smiling
> Extremity out of act.

Speech has become music. In the printed texts you will find a stage-direction just before this passage, 'Marina sings'. It is not authentic. From the Quarto and Folio texts it is clear that the 'song' indicated is sung while Marina approaches, and not by her. It has not been preserved; and we do not miss it. 'When she speaks, she seems to sing.' The resurgence, but now with richer harmonies, of the lyrical quality which in tragedy was necessarily suppressed, is very marked throughout the Shakespearian scenes of *Pericles*, and here it culminates. At the end of this scene, after Pericles' wild cry of joy,

> Mine own, Helicanus!
> She is not dead!

it melts and etherealizes into that supreme lyric utterance in which a few of the simplest, shortest, most ordinary words are transfigured and become pure air and fire:

> But what music?
> My lord, I hear none.
> None?
> The music of the spheres: list, my Marina!

In virtue of this single scene, Marina takes rank as a fourth in the triple garland of the world, beside Miranda, Perdita, Imogen.

Just about the same time, Chapman, in *The Tears of Peace*, wrote the famous and lovely lines:

> With his charm he still'd
> All sounds in air, and left so free mine ears
> That I might hear the music of the spheres,
> And all the angels singing out of heaven.

But alongside of Shakespeare's even that beautiful poetry dims its lustre.

V

THE ROMANCES AND FRAGMENTS, AND THE SONNETS

THERE were yet some years to come before Shakespeare finally severed his connexion with the theatre. He did so gradually. Fletcher took his place as chief manager of the company. Shakespeare was less himself in London now, though his definite retirement to Stratford cannot be placed earlier than 1611, and for some time after that he still interested himself in the affairs of the Globe and the Blackfriars Theatres, in which he apparently remained a partner up till his death; he paid occasional visits to London; and he continued to help his old colleagues and their younger successors not only in the production but in the composition of plays. Sometimes this amounted to formal collaboration, or joint authorship; sometimes, less formally, it was only by writing into, or writing up and retouching, plays from other hands; and perhaps, though this is rather matter of speculation and inference than of direct evidence, by contributing to a play which was in gestation scenes and passages of his own which he had already written. It is also fairly certain that in these years he did a certain amount of remodelling and partial rewriting on those earlier plays of his own which were from time to time revived. No less than six of those plays were revived and presented at the festival performances at Court in connexion with the marriage of Princess Elizabeth to the Elector Palatine in the winter of 1612–13. And though most of these were comparatively recent, the two which were performed

twice over, and may accordingly be presumed to have been singled out as special favourites, were *King Henry IV* and *Much Ado about Nothing*. Apart from this, his product in these later years, from 1609 onwards, is associated with the new movement; with the treatment of drama in the key of what it is convenient and intelligible, if it be rather ambiguous, to call romance. As usual, he was not an innovator; he did what other dramatists were doing, but did it with his own incomparable skill and ease. His earliest known contribution to this field, in *Pericles*, has been already mentioned. Now he enriches it with its two masterpieces. Masterpieces of his own we may hesitate to call them when we think of the solid magnificence of his central product; but in their kind, they take rank with the best: and certainly no plays of his are better loved, and none more endlessly delightful. These are *A Winter's Tale* and *Cymbeline*. They are both long plays; *Cymbeline* is in fact one of the longest. They are alike in the relaxed quality and one might almost say the artlessness of their construction. They are alike in the *morbidezza* of their handling, and the fluent charm both of their verse and of their prose. They are alike too in the way in which (as is the manner of romance) they transport us from land to land, from courts to caves and cottages; even, in *A Winter's Tale*, from one generation to another. They show us the accomplished artist amusing himself, playing with his art, with the ease that comes of perfect mastery, the carelessness that is so sure-footed and so certain of its power, and in the last resort, of its control. Nowhere is Shakespeare's adroitness more triumphant

than in the way in which in both plays, after letting itself go, it might almost seem at random, the mechanism is reassembled for the tableau of the final scene. Yet it may be said of both of them, I think, that they are more delightful to read than to see acted. The stage is an exacting mistress; and as a servant, has her limitations. Shakespeare is loosening his grasp of the theatre: or alternatively, the theatre is loosening its grasp of Shakespeare. Neither its triumphs nor its exigencies concern him very much now. He writes much more to please himself, following the predilection (or the whim) of his own fancy, but knowing still, with instinctive tact, where to stop. The romantic drama had originated in the dramatization of the novel. The connexion remained close, as it still does. *Romeo and Juliet* is closely modelled on the prose novel by Painter and the verse novel by Broke, both of which were expanded paraphrases of the celebrated Italian novel by Bandello. In the wide European movement, that novel was not only translated into other languages, but was dramatized in Italy, France, and Spain almost contemporaneously. Sometimes, as was the case with *Pericles*, this dramatization was done by the novelist himself; but *Pericles* shows, very instructively, how necessary it was that it should be put in the hands of an expert professional playwright if it was to be executed successfully. The shifting back of the field of romance from the drama to the novel was approaching, and here we see its premonitory symptoms. The Bohemia of *A Winter's Tale*, the Britain of *Cymbeline*, and the island of *The Tempest*, fluctuate between earth and a sort of fairyland. In these plays

too, in *Cymbeline* most prominently, the style, in marked contrast to the closely-packed, elliptical, compressed, and pregnant diction of the tragedies, floats in full volume, undulating with easy amplitude, parenthesis within parenthesis. The relaxation of tension throughout is not merely negative. It is really the last phase to which matured artistic power brings the artist. Nothing is more remarkable, in the final work of many great artists, than their passage from the strenuous magnificence of their central periods to a triumphant ease, to a simplicity which is the last touch of mastery. Their control of the mechanism has become so complete that it does not seem mechanism at all. The feet of the verse have become wings. Consummate metrical and verbal artifice has reached its goal, to become undistinguishable from the most direct simplicity.

There is another point in the construction of *A Winter's Tale* which is of exceptional interest, the more so as it offers a suggestive parallel to the construction of *Julius Cæsar*. It is a play in two parts, which are (somewhat like the first and second parts of *The Pilgrim's Progress*) in themselves detachable. The gap of sixteen years between Acts III and IV shifts the key as well as the period. Shakespeare himself thought it proper to emphasize this. In the prologue to the second part spoken by 'Time, as Chorus'—very much in the same way that Rumour, as chorus, introduces the second part of *King Henry IV*—Time defines his function as being 'to o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour to plant and o'erwhelm custom'. The regular drama, tragedy and comedy alike, works out law and obeys custom.

In the new romantic drama, both law and custom are set aside. The old rules are discarded, the old landmarks are obliterated. In *A Winter's Tale*, the two parts are deftly soldered together (for Shakespeare's sleight-of-hand never deserts him) by a short final scene tacked on to the end of the first part, and some recapitulatory sentences at the opening of the second part. Otherwise, Part I is self-contained and complete. It is a short tragedy; shortened, like *Macbeth*, by drastic syncopation of the introductory action; it might be entitled 'The Tragical History of King Leontes of Sicily'. And it concludes with the authentic tragic ending, in the last speech of Leontes (Act III, Sc. ii), which in its substance as well as in its rhythm and wording, and in the way in which it leads up to the processional exit of all the assembled company, is precisely in the same key and of the same quality as the concluding speeches with which the stage is cleared in *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus*, even down to the technical device of ending on a broken line. The second part, i.e. Acts IV and V, were it preluded by a short introductory scene, might similarly stand by itself as a complete romantic comedy. In the completed play no such introductory scene is required; the linking up is done in the added last scene of Act III and in a short recapitulation (in a conversation between Polixenes and Camillo) at the opening of Act IV: then 'enter Autolycus, singing', and we are at once in fairyland. Thus the action of the second part has full room to expand: and as a matter of fact the two Acts of which it consists are a good deal longer than the whole three Acts of the first part. This is due to the unprecedented length

of one scene (IV. iii). It is the length of a short play by itself, and actually longer than one of the comedies of Terence; nearly 900 lines of pure delight, in which the artist moves unchecked and unimpelled, *sì che remo non vuol, nè altro velo che l'ali sue tra liti si lontani*, 'so that he seeks not oars, nor other sail than his own wings between shores so distant'.

Last, almost certainly, among Shakespeare's plays —if we leave out of account the Shakespearian scenes in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and the contributions (slight at the most) which he made to Fletcher's *King Henry VIII*—is *The Tempest*. It may have been for this reason that the editors of the First Folio placed it at the head of their list.

The masque or dramatic pageant, performed in a royal palace, a nobleman's house, or the hall of one of the Inns of Court, staged with great elaboration, and with costumes, lighting, and machinery far beyond either the requirements or the possibilities of the common stage, had in the reign of Elizabeth been an important rival or adjunct of the public theatre. After the accession of James it doubled its importance. It had the enthusiastic support of Queen Anne. It had Inigo Jones as the director of a whole corps of machinists, engineers, costume-designers, ballet-organizers, and artificers of every description. Lavish expense, indeed boundless extravagance, was a note of the Jacobean age. It was part of the growing restlessness of the nation, alongside of the expansion of England and the reaction against the Tudor absolutism. Historians place the Great Emigration, which created the overseas Empire and profoundly modified the course of all subsequent

history, as beginning a year or two after Shakespeare's death.

Towards the flood of masques and pageant-plays which was a sign and a part of the new movement, Shakespeare made his single complete contribution (so far as we know) in *The Tempest*. Its date, it is curious to note, is almost exactly contemporaneous with that of the Authorized Version of the Bible.

This unique character makes it difficult to class or to compare (were comparison or classification needed) with the rest of Shakespeare's dramatic work. Technically, it is a drama on the classical lines, with the normal five acts, and with the action (as to which, it is also unique in Shakespeare) only extending over a few hours, so that stage-time and action-time almost coalesce. In its use of non-human or semi-human characters it goes far beyond the fairies of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* or the Hecate and witches of *Macbeth*: this is also in some sense a reversion to classical treatment. The inset idyll of Ferdinand and Miranda is a tiny masterpiece of jewel-finish on familiar lines; Ariel and Caliban, on the other hand, are elusive creations of genius which have ever since been the exercise-ground of critics and researchers, but which ought to be taken, as they were meant, quite simply as pageantry. Of dramatic action in the stricter sense of the term there is little or none; for the action is throughout, down to its smallest details, planned and ordered by Prospero. He is the magician—one might almost go further and say the playwright—and the other figures are his puppets. This peculiar character of Prospero's has gone far in its unconscious influence

towards creating the belief that Prospero is in effect Shakespeare himself, that we can hear in *The Tempest* Shakespeare speaking in his own voice rather than giving speech to a dramatic creation. If this were so, it would be some justification for the position given to *The Tempest* in the First Folio, though it would equally well serve towards placing it, as it is sometimes placed now, at the end and not at the beginning of the Canon. There is much certainly, towards the end of the play, to suggest this view and impress it on us; and with due caution, it may be largely accepted. It is based not only on the epilogue; not only on Prospero's announcement of his own purpose to

> retire me to my Milan, where
> Every third thought shall be my grave;

not only on the earlier passage where he orders Ariel to introduce the masque of goddesses and the dance of nymphs and reapers, with the curious soliloquizing words:

> I must
> Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple
> Some vanity of my art: it is my promise
> And they expect it from me;

though, indeed, 'my Milan' we must inevitably think of as Stratford, and 'this young couple' as the new generation. Nor is it only in that marvellous passage—the most famous as it is the most magnificent in all Shakespeare if not in all literature—beginning 'Our revels now are ended', which has been already quoted and need not be repeated now. Not only in those concluding scenes, but more

subtly throughout, Prospero is, as I have suggested, the playwright; controlling, evolving, suspending, varying, interrupting, or resuming the action; the other characters, though alive with the full Shakespearian vitality, being, so far as concerns their action, figures that move at Prospero's manipulation. The dramatist has projected himself bodily into the drama. For once, and for once only, he lets us see him actually at work. It is perhaps this double consciousness—as though we were simultaneously in front watching the play as spectators, and behind seeing it being handled—that makes *The Tempest* not in fact (so at least one is told, and my own experience, such as it is, bears that out) highly effective on the stage. The illusion or hallucination to which, in seeing a play acted, we are asked to abandon ourselves, has not its full chance. But when we read it, if we read it carefully enough, it brings us nearer than almost anything else to understanding Shakespeare's art. It gets us closer to Shakespeare himself than we are likely to come by other means, whether by building insubstantial fabrics of arbitrary hypothesis, by searching in the plays for theories or obsessions, or by extracting from them revelations about Shakespeare's own experiences. His experiences, so far as they concern us, are the impact life made on him. His life was the life of the world in which he lived. With *The Tempest*, Shakespeare, if by Shakespeare we mean the body of Shakespeare's art, the world which Shakespeare created, vitalized, and gave to the human race, ends. It is in his own exquisite words, 'the setting sun, and music at the close'.

The Canon of Shakespeare's dramatic works

remains as it was fixed by the editors of the First Folio with the addition, made in the second issue of the Third Folio in 1664, of *Pericles*. Even within the Canon there is, as we have seen, a good deal which is of mixed or uncertain authorship, and a considerable amount, though small in proportion to the total, which we know to be not from Shakespeare's hand, both among the earlier and the later plays. Of *Pericles* I have already spoken. *Henry VIII* should hardly be in the Canon at all. Shakespeare's influence over Fletcher in it is of course very marked; to a certain extent it Shakespearianizes, as we might say, the whole play; and of his actual hand there are, in its earlier scenes, traces which can hardly be mistaken. But his direct contributions to it are not large in amount. Their precise extent is debated, but even on the larger estimates, with which I do not myself agree, they are not sufficient to make the play as a whole Shakespeare's. This applies more strongly to *Titus Andronicus*. Its inclusion in the original Canon may be taken as evidence that Shakespeare had some hand in retouching it, whether for original performance or for revival. But the traces of his hand are at most very faint, and even of the passages in which they have been conjecturally identified, we cannot go further than saying that they are in his manner and might have been written by him. Outside of the Canon lie the successive zones of what by an apt and convenient term is called the Shakespeare Apocrypha. Under that title, its contents, so far as they are not to be unhesitatingly rejected, are given in full in Tucker Brooke's scholarly and almost indispensable volume. Even of the fourteen plays reprinted there,

those which 'alone appear entitled' in the editor's words, 'to a place on grounds of either reason or custom', the majority may be at once disposed of as containing nothing of Shakespeare. It is possible, though not more, that he gave some help, during the period of his apprenticeship, in the composition of the crude but powerful melodrama, *Arden of Feversham*. The anonymous history-play of *Edward III* (1595) has enough in the first two acts of writing which might be Shakespeare's, to give ground for the belief that he had a hand in its composition; at the least, that he revised it when it was in draft, and while doing so added some touches of his own. Had his share in its composition been substantial, it can hardly be doubted that, while it was not regarded as admissible to the Canon, it would have had his name on the title-page of the Quartos of 1596 and 1599; for by that time Shakespeare was widely known as a dramatic author and the name had a selling value. Such occasional or incidental contributions to plays written for and produced by his company must, no doubt, have often been made by Shakespeare as part of his day's work; and it is quite likely that a number of them have disappeared with the plays themselves when the manuscripts were scrapped. The palmary instance in which by a piece of unusual luck, the manuscript has survived, is the play of *Sir Thomas More*, on which in recent years much attention has been deservedly concentrated. Here we have a draft, by whom is quite unknown, which has been parcelled out—no doubt owing to a call for its immediate production—for transcription and completion among no less than five different hands. One of them, as

has been established, with a probability which nearly amounts to certainty, by the concurrence of experts, was Shakespeare's. The three pages of 149 lines in all, in what is known as the Insurrection Scene (Act II, sc. iv of the play as printed) are on the internal evidence of style, metre, prose rhythm, and diction, clearly his work; the alterations and erasures made in the course of putting them on paper show that they were written down by their author himself as they took shape in his brain; and the cumulative proof is irresistible that in them we possess the unique and priceless treasure of a piece of Shakespeare's dramatic work in autograph.

The Two Noble Kinsmen, the most important item in the contents of the Shakespeare apocrypha, and the last of them which need be glanced at here, stands on a quite different footing. It is a play which was from the first announced, and formally described, as of joint authorship. The authors named in the earliest extant edition, the Quarto of 1634, are Fletcher and Shakespeare. Much the greater part of it is indubitable and unquestioned Fletcher; his also are the beautiful lyrics. The presence of a third, or possibly of both a third and a fourth hand, that of Massinger, or of Massinger and Beaumont, has been suspected, has been asserted, has given rise to whole volumes of controversy, and is still matter of debate. It is impossible here to pursue the inquiry, which is both intricate and fascinating: it must be just mentioned, because on it largely turns the determination of authorship in those scenes or passages which are in the Shakespearian manner but have not the authentic and unmistakable Shakespearian voice. But setting

aside these, we have left what is pure Shakespeare, and as a matter of artistry has to be ranked among his consummate achievements: fragments indeed, but fragments of gold. The date of the composition and production of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is unknown. On the strength of a doubtful allusion to it in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, it has been attributed to 1614; but the allusion, if it exists, only fixes a posterior limit; and there are allusions of a more certain kind in the same piece both to *The Tempest* and to *A Winter's Tale*. To their period, the Shakespearian scenes in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* undoubtedly belong; and we may indulge the fancy, if we choose, that they are in fact the latest dramatic writing that came from Shakespeare's pen.

The approach to Shakespeare, which is the subject we are dealing with, is primarily and mainly the approach to Shakespeare the dramatist, or to put it otherwise, to the Shakespeare of the Canon. But Shakespeare the dramatist and Shakespeare the poet are one person. No approach to him is other than partial, just as no study of him is complete, no appreciation of him adequate, which ignores the Sonnets. Here we enter on a path strewn thickly with the bleaching bones of critics. The remarkable and enigmatic little volume of 1609 has for long attracted as much attention, and has given rise to as much controversy and as many superstructures of theory or fancy as any of the plays; one might almost say, as the whole body of the plays taken together. It appeared just at the transitional point between the tragic and romantic periods of Shakespeare's dramatic activity; but its publication, generally considered to

have been surreptitious and generally conceded to have been unauthorized, was five or six years later than the latest date that can be probably assigned to any of its contents, and from twenty to twenty-five years after the original composition of the greater part of them. It presents many curious analogies, on its smaller scale, to the First Folio, including some of the same perplexities besides other perplexities of its own: questions of dates, of revisions and additions, of mixed or dubious or wrongly attributed authorship, of imperfect or mutilated or interpolated texts; and above all (more than in the plays, though the plays also have been the subject of much similar speculation) of what Shakespeare meant or did not mean. With the Sonnets even more than with the plays, we must mark and avoid a disastrous tendency to read between the lines, to treat them not as poetry but as vehicles of problems, of philosophies, or of obsessions. The obsessions are in Shakespeare's critics or interpreters, not in Shakespeare. The plays do not embody ethical, political, or social doctrine; the Sonnets are not an autobiography. Both plays and Sonnets are works of art, in which Shakespeare followed fashion, adapted himself to environment, accepted but raised to a higher plane the current art of his age, and the image or interpretation of life which that art presented. How much of his own actual experience lies behind the Sonnets, or how little, we do not know, and it is as idle as fruitless to inquire. His experience, in the only sense in which it matters for this purpose, is all with which he came into contact. Once more then, and now with added significance, it must be repeated that we should

beware of ensconcing ourselves in seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear. For, when the last has been said of the imitative quality of the Sonnets, of the closeness with which they follow the literary conventions of the period, of the artifice that mingles with their art, it remains true, not only that they embody these themes and conventions in poetry of unique splendour and beauty which eclipses the whole mass of contemporary sonnet-literature; not only that they carry into reflective poetry that lyrical quality which is a distinctive note in the whole body of Shakespeare's work; but that they are steeped in and vitalized by the same creative genius which makes Hamlet and Othello, Cleopatra and Imogen, living people more real than reality. Was Shakespeare conscious, any more than the public then and for long afterwards was conscious, of his supreme creative gift? Very possibly not. Unconsciousness of genius is part of his translucency; it is part of that boundless capacity for taking impressions swiftly and immediately, from his whole environment, from men and women, from books, from nature; and it is in a way the secret—we cannot call it the explanation—of that no less unique mastery of verbal and metrical expression, from the light melodiousness of his earliest to the ampler rhythms and graver harmonies of his latest verse, in which he stands alone.

The fame of Shakespeare began, broadly speaking, only after his death: the fame of the Sonnets is not much more than a century old. The little volume of 1609, whether or not it was a mere piratical adventure as it is generally considered to have been,

carelessly printed from imperfect autographs or faulty transcripts as it certainly was, attracted little notice. There are no contemporary references to it. 'More sonneteering' was apparently the only criticism passed on it. Shakespeare's own earlier plays, down to a time at which it would appear that the bulk of his own extant sonnets were written, are full of satirical references to the vogue of the sonnet; and by 1609, that vogue was already faded. The output of sonnets in the sixteenth century was throughout western Europe prodigious: those extant in print, a mere fraction of the whole, are computed at not less than 300,000. In England, the full violence of the sonnet-craze spent itself in ten years or so, and Shakespeare's sonnets are practically the last addition—they are the last important addition—to the mass of Elizabethan sonnet-literature. So far as we can prove a negative, Shakespeare took no concern whatever about their issue, any more than he did about the piratical prints of his plays. Except for the garbled, disordered, and incomplete version of them printed in the volume entitled *Shakespeare's Poems* in 1640, they were not even reprinted for a century; and it was nearly a century more before they came by their own. A little more than one hundred years ago, Wordsworth wrote that 'with this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart'. The phrase has been pressed much beyond what Wordsworth meant by it: and if it is in a spirit of prying or indecent curiosity that we turn the key, we shall find the casket empty. We may extract from it, like rabbits from a conjurer's hat, anything we choose: that is to say, anything that we have first put in. But as a treasury of a nobler kind, full-charged

with imaginative emotion as it is close-packed with metrical and verbal felicities, it is inexhaustible.

Thorpe's dedication, which has been tortured into as many meanings as the Number of the Beast, is most plausibly and quite adequately explained as a mere piece of roguish mystification. The explanation given by Colonel B. R. Ward and Mr. J. A. Fort is (or so it seems to me) one of the most ingenious reconstructions made by modern criticism based on skilled research. Thorpe, the Adventurer in Setting Forth—a synonym for the Piratical Publisher, the full force and aptness of which can be appreciated by all careful students of English history in that age —wishes all happiness to Mr. W. H., or alternatively (for it is cleverly put so as to go either way) wishes happiness to Mr. W. Hall. William Hall was a bird of the same feather, who had begot, i.e. procured, presumably by clandestine means, but at all events in the way of his business, the MS. copy from which the Sonnets were printed. The happiness which Thorpe wishes for him is, in the first place, continued good luck in his shady traffic as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles; but also, and more particularly, the eternity which is the theme of the opening section of the Sonnets, namely that of continued life in his own posterity. That particular eternity Mr. Hall—if he be the same William Hall whose marriage is recorded in the registers of Hackney Church in the previous August—was apparently on the point of possessing, or just possessed of, when the volume was going through the press at the end of May or beginning of June 1609. The dedication then, is in fact a congratulation by Thorpe

to Hall on the birth, or the expected birth, of a son and heir. But with malicious adroitness—for business is business—it is so worded as to excite curiosity by a suggestion of some mystery, and promote the sale of the book. If so, it has attained a complete though a long-deferred success; it has originated a whole literature of speculation, and has been pressed into the service of all the theories that have been built up about the Sonnets:

> Heaps of huge words uphoarded hideously
> With horrid sound though having little sense,

where much ink has been spilt to small purpose: 'the abundance of an idle brain' to quote another line of Spenser's in which he deprecates the criticisms made on his own poetry.

The suggestion that Hall obtained the manuscript which went to press from Shakespeare himself is, to say the least, highly improbable. Apart from other considerations, it is hardly credible that he should have given for that purpose a manuscript so full of errors, imperfections, and alternative readings, and not even taken the trouble to look over the proof-sheets. We know that collections of his sonnets were pretty widely copied and circulated in manuscript in or before 1598. In transcription, such collections were very liable to disarrangements, blunders, and interpolations. Confusion thus wrought was quite beyond the author's control. From some such copy the volume was in all probability printed. Neither time nor place serves here to state, still less to investigate, the problems, fascinating as they are, of authorship, date, and arrangement. But I may give briefly,

without going into detail or touching on matters of acute controversy, certain conclusions without the arguments on which they are based.

The 154 pieces of which the collection is composed admittedly fall into two parts. The first, Sonnets 1–125, is a deliberate and in some sense continuous series, to which the little piece numbered 126 is an envoi or colophon. The second is a miscellaneous and disorderly appendix of 28 pieces (Sonnets 127–54) mixed in subject, in quality, and almost certainly in authorship. Two of them (153 and 154) are, there is little or no doubt, not by Shakespeare. Eight others are so devoid of the characteristic Shakespearian verbal evolution and metrical phrasing that they have to be classed as *dubia vel spuria*. The remaining 18 can be unhesitatingly assigned to Shakespeare on internal evidence of substance and style. The whole of this mixed appendix has in any case no structural connexion with the main body of the Sonnets. In that main body, the authorship of several sonnets has been questioned, but on very inadequate grounds with the exception of Sonnet 20 'A woman's face with nature's own hand painted', which if it be Shakespeare's, is Shakespeare parodying the manner of some other sonnet-writer.

The composition of the Sonnets clearly extends over several, perhaps a good many, years. Few have any definite, none any certain, mark of date. The earliest, including the continuous set of variations on a single theme with which the collection opens, might to judge from style be as early as the *Venus and Adonis* of 1593, and cannot well be much later. The latest dates assignable, and that is only a dubious conjec-

ture, are ten years later. In Sonnet 107 'Not mine own fears, nor the prophetic soul', the 'eclipse of the mortal moon' has been taken plausibly as a reference to the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of James in the spring of 1603. But Mr. G. B. Harrison has recently pointed out that the political allusion, if it exists, may be referred with equal or greater probability to the autumn of 1596 when Elizabeth completed her grand climacteric. During that critical year (as it was universally held to be) the Queen's health both of body and mind had, in fact, caused much anxiety. There are even slenderer grounds for finding an allusion in Sonnet 125 'Were 't aught to me I bore the canopy', to a part taken by Shakespeare, whose company had then been made honorary Grooms of the Chamber, in the reception of the Spanish Embassy of August 1604, when the treaty of peace was ratified which put an end to the long state of war between England and Spain. It is also worth noting, however, that Sonnet 104, an exercise on the theme that the 'fair friend's' beauty was unimpaired since their first meeting, can be read to mean that the friendship had begun not three years, but nine years, earlier. Otherwise, we are driven back on delicate criteria of style. The comparison, to take one particular point, of the six-line stanzas of *Venus and Adonis* with their metrical equivalents in the concluding sestets of the Sonnets, is full of interest and suggestion, and is a suitable subject of study. So is the comparison with those sonnets, or passages in sonnet form, which are scattered here and there in the earlier plays: there are for instance three formal sonnets, detachable from their context, in *Love's Labour's*

Lost. These are in a different key; they have not the fullness of rhythm and substance which the Sonnets proper (those at least of them of which the authorship is unchallenged) exhibit throughout. Few, if any, single lines in the Sonnets wholly outrange the finest single lines in the early poems; but it is to their larger quality that we must have regard: the quality which is akin to the rich, fully-charged, pregnant manner of Shakespeare's dramatic maturity. The searching power, the mastery which penetrates to the core of life as well as illuminating its surface, are those of the Shakespeare of the great tragedies. Study of the Sonnets is of high value not for their own sake only, but towards a larger and finer appreciation of Shakespeare's art in its development and culmination.

But the Sonnets should, first and also last, be read and studied as poetry and for their own sake. This hardly needs urging; for as to their poetical quality extremists meet, and all sane critical opinion is at one. There are other English sonnet-writers who from time to time reach heights as great. For clarity, for weight of import, for august severity, the best of Wordsworth's—and these are not a few—are unrivalled. They are not comparable in any way with Shakespeare's. The hundred sonnets of Rossetti's *House of Life*, and others of his outside of that collection, offer some parallel, though on a different range, in their figurings upon a single group of motives, in their intensity of imaginative emotion, in their richness of ornament, and it may be added, in their conceits and mannerisms. With both poets we have to take into account sonnets outside of the two large collections, as fine as the finest within them; in the

Shakespeare appendix, 129 'The expense of spirit in a waste of shame', 133 'Beshrew that heart that makes my heart to groan', 140 'Be wise as thou art cruel', 146 'Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth', may be specially instanced.

But just as Shakespeare's dramatic work eclipses that of all his contemporaries—'when the moon shone we did not see the candle'—so beside Shakespeare's Sonnets the whole mass of other Elizabethan sonnet-literature pales and thins. If I may offer advice to students and to readers, it would be to know the Sonnets by heart, to allow them to sink in and germinate, to become saturated with them and to let them gradually, line by line, phrase by phrase, passage by passage, disengage their condensed sweetness and expand their concentrated power. That indeed may be said of all Shakespeare's best work. It may be said of all really great poetry; as of all those achievements of supreme genius, in any form of art, to which we find ourselves always returning, and which we always find, on returning to them, even greater than we knew.

VI

SHAKESPEARE'S ARTISTRY AND SHAKESPEARE'S WORLD

In conclusion, I wish to sum up and reinforce, by some further considerations, and with some amount of recapitulation, what has been dealt with up to this point. The aim followed in these lectures has been, as their title indicated, one of approach. The attempt has been made to offer suggestions, to point to clues, towards such appreciation and comprehension of Shakespeare as is the preliminary foundation of, or starting point for, advanced and scholarly study. This means placing ourselves at a point from which we regard the whole body of Shakespeare's work as an organic unity with a continuous life, with diversity of operations but one spirit. It might be thought of, according to the particular way we may choose to look at it, as the reflection, or the impress, or the projection, of a single personality, so far as preserved and transmitted: preserved, or in some sense interred, but only for perpetual disinterment.

As regards the plays, that record has to be retranslated from the printed page into live action. As regards the poems, and also the plays as literature, it has to be similarly, though less obviously, retranslated into live speech. In this process it reaches the mind and affects the emotions and the imagination not through the reader's eye only, but through the reader's (or the reciter's) and the listener's ear, or through a combination and mutual reinforcement of the two senses. Reading Shakespeare aloud—and the art of reading aloud, though now no longer

neglected, and coming more by its own, is even yet too little studied and practised—opens out a whole new field of appreciation; this is so whether it be read to listeners only, or to listeners with the printed page simultaneously before their eyes. Not only so, but in individual study, the inward ear can learn to associate itself with the silent reading of the printed page; the inward eye, to associate itself with the reception of visible action. What might be almost called a sixth sense can be created.

The reflection, I said, or the impress, or the projection, of a personality. But such terms must, in speaking of Shakespeare, be used cautiously. The artist, *qua* artist, merges his personality in his art. Shakespeare may in a quite real sense be called impersonal. He is, for us, a reflecting surface, or rather, a translucent lens; and the world in which he lives and moves is not one which he impresses, but one of which he takes the impressions. One must never for a moment forget that Shakespeare—that is to say, the Shakespeare with whom we have to deal, with whom we can get into touch—is an artist, a creator. 'In sechs und dreissig Dramen', in the striking phrase of Ludwig, 'hat er die Welt erneuert.' He is not a profound thinker, still less what Coleridge called him in a phrase as disastrous in its effects as it is false in its substance, 'the guide and pioneer of true philosophy'. He is not a moralist; he is concerned with life and lets morality take care of itself. He is not a theologian or a politician, though volumes have been written to prove him a crypto-Catholic, or a Bible Christian, or a devout believer in the doctrines (as far as these can be ascertained) of the

Church of England under the Tudor settlement: and other volumes, as futile, to prove him in sympathy with despotic government, with aristocratic privilege, with the aspirations of democracy. He is not a teacher; he draws no morals: he shows us things and people as they are, and lets us do our own learning from them. He keeps aloof, with very rare exceptions, from all controversies, even those which raged within his own theatrical circle; perhaps the only exception that presents itself without searching is the discussion in *Hamlet* of the employment of child-actors, which I have already mentioned as a sort of interpolation, quite undramatic and quite irrelevant; and even there, it is worth noting that the controversy was already dying down for lack of fuel when Shakespeare was induced, at some particular instance or for some particular occasion, to intervene in it. He is not a learned, or, in the modern sense of the term, an educated man. Reading and writing and the elements of Latin (including scraps of the classical Latin authors, extracts from whom were in general use for school text-books) he acquired, there is no reason to doubt, at the Stratford Free Grammar School. Beyond that, all he knew was picked up, partly from reading—it is likely enough that he read voraciously in the years after he left school—but mainly from his amazing power of taking in, assimilating, and making use of, his whole environment. The parallelisms which curious industry has collected, in countless numbers, with phrases or passages in ancient or foreign authors count for nothing. Seneca is a favourite hunting-ground here. Let me illustrate the fallacy involved by a concrete instance from the

present day. Not long ago, a London charwoman (a profession in which much experience of life is often accompanied by much insight and wisdom) observed in the course of conversation, 'There ain't no 'appiness in this world; we've got to be 'appy without it.' That really profound saying occurs in substance in one of Seneca's Moral Epistles. But the charwoman had not read Seneca. To take another illustrative instance: in Mr. J. S. Smart's *Shakespeare: Truth and Tradition*, Othello's words about the handkerchief, 'a sibyl . . . in her prophetic fury sewed the work', are traced to a passage in the *Orlando Furioso* where the embroideries of the magic pavilion brought from the imperial palace at Constantinople for the marriage of Ruggiero and Bradamante—it was made by Cassandra for Hector—are said to have been executed by *una donzella de la terra d'Ilia ch' avea il furor profetico congiunto*; and the inference is drawn that as the words 'prophetic fury' are not in Harington's translation, Shakespeare must have read the *Orlando* from beginning to end (this passage is in the last canto of the poem) in the original Italian. Comment is needless. So too with the profound knowledge of the Bible which, for edification, has been ascribed to Shakespeare by many of his admirers; so far from being profound, it is no more than what was common property at a time when church attendance was required by statute and enforced by sharp penalties. Shakespeare drew his sustenance 'as we draw air, fast as 'tis ministered': from 'courtier, scholar, soldier', from travellers, from templars, from tradesmen, from all the mixed public which frequented the theatres and the taverns. All was grist that came to his mill.

He was perpetually taking in and perpetually giving out; gorging, as one might say, on mulberry leaves and spinning out silk, cocoon after cocoon. What he took in was the whole mass and movement of life; both of the life going on around him, and of the life already framed into stories and dramas, or recorded in chronicles; both the raw material to which he gave shape and structure, and the shaped material which to a greater or less degree he reshaped and recomposed, and which he vitalized. As regards his processes, there is an illuminating sentence of Hoffmannstahl which gives, so far as it can be given, the secret. When composing a libretto for Strauss on the theme of a play of Calderon's, 'I shall use it', he wrote, 'as a starting-point rather than a foundation. I must resolve the whole thing into my own dreams, and out of them some new drama will take shape.'

This is the province of his artistry. We cannot draw aside the curtain behind which he operated. We cannot open any door that would let us in to see the artist at work. But we should not be much wiser if we did. For the eye only sees what it brings the power to see; and the artist, the creator, works not only (as the Greek dramatist Menander said) silently, but as Blake adds to that word, invisibly. What we can do, is to watch and appreciate the artistry of Shakespeare in its results; and thereby we may get some insight into its processes. No pains are wasted in doing this. And nowhere is clear thinking more necessary.

It will be well then to begin by defining and distinguishing the different senses in which we may

speak of Shakespeare as an artist and study his artistry. They are different, though of course they are inseparable. A distinction must be drawn for clearness of thought. But what we have to deal with is the operation of a single mind and a single hand, realized in a body of work—a world, we may call it—which is a continuous organic unity.

We may think then of Shakespeare as an artist in three senses, and of his artistry from three points of view.

First, as a dramatic artist, manipulating the machinery of the theatre, and using theatrical forms, methods, and materials.

Secondly, as an artist in language, which is the medium through which he expresses himself, as the painter expresses himself in the medium of pigments, or the musician in the medium of sounds producible from the human voice and from instruments with all their range of tones and colours.

Thirdly, as an artist in the two spheres broadly distinguishable as tragedy and comedy, and in their interconnexion; or to put it otherwise, in his control and use of the tragic and comic spirit. These, it should be added, are themselves ambiguous terms, which require careful scrutiny.

As regards all three alike, the first thing we notice when we begin to study Shakespeare, and perhaps also the last impression which that study leaves on us, is his seemingly careless ease and his inexhaustible fertility. He never seems overburdened by his art; he is not a slave to it, as many artists, including some of the greatest, have been. Michelangelo is the great instance. To him, his art was a toil and an

agony. What Swinburne says of him is as true as it is nobly expressed:

> He was most awful of the sons of God

(Shakespeare is never awful, though his great tragedies are)

> And at his feet as natural servants lay
> Twilight and dawn and night and labouring day.

Michelangelo had compelled them into his service by superhuman unremitting labour. To Shakespeare they came; or, if Shakespeare came to them, it was a case of coming, seeing, and in the same breath, conquering. The words may remind one of what Cicero wrote to Atticus when Julius Cæsar was sweeping down through Italy in the winter of 49 B.C., *Hoc τέρας*, 'this portentous creature', *horribili vigilantia, celeritate, diligentia est.* In these qualities Shakespeare likewise is portentous. His swiftness of hand is evident, and is fully vouched for, by the unanimous testimony of those who knew him, whether in praise, as by his colleagues and editors in the preface to the First Folio, or in rather petulant half-censure in the celebrated criticism of Ben Jonson. Vigilance and diligence (or, watchfulness and attentiveness) are terms that we must define more carefully; they will apply to Shakespeare fully, if by vigilance, we mean the eye that never sleeps and that nothing escapes, and by diligence, the keen attention he gives by instinct and habit, as though he could not help giving it, to anything with which he comes into contact. It is the sense in which Autolycus observes, in words which might be used of the creator of Autolycus, that 'every lane's end, every

shop, church, session, hanging, yields a careful man work'. Otherwise, diligence is not the word we should think of using for him, though certainty is. He moves through life, in his own words,

> With such a careless force and forceless care
> As if that luck, in very spite of cunning,
> Bade him win all.

We shall hardly better that description. His workmanship might often be called as careless as it is rapid. His concern is for the immediate effect: and he reaches that immediately, thrusting aside or cleaving through all hindrances: 'heaping', as is well said of him by Stoll, 'imperfections on perfections'. Thoughts leap out as images in the moment of their conception. Language pours in on them faster than he can get it down. Action seems to lift him along with it. Gaps, inconsistencies, absurdities are taken in his stride and left behind. Yet all this torrent of words and dazzle of action has depth below depth. It is not verbiage or theatricality, though both words have often been used of it, and sometimes with justice. Each new generation, each renewed reading, each fresh representation reveals more. His world is, like life itself, inexhaustible.

On Shakespeare's theatrical artistry—on the artistic side, that is to say, of his stage-management—I propose to say but a few words. It is for experts. Mr. Granville-Barker, himself distinguished as an actor, a producer, and a playwright, is handling the subject in his *Shakespeare Prefaces* with a skill and insight which will, when the series of Prefaces is completed, leave little more to be said. It must be

studied in detail, point by point in play after play; and of course, in steady connexion with actual stage-production. Only thus can it be appreciated adequately. All the resources of stagecraft, in its proper meaning, are between his fingers, and he uses them with unfailing agility, swiftness, certainty. He took his plots from anywhere; he seldom troubled to invent them. Some are quite bad; some, very likely, were put in his hands and he was told to make a play out of them. As in the world of life, so in the world of drama, he took things as they were; and everything submitted to his adroit manipulation. In his hands, however feeble or inconsequent or preposterous or disagreeable is the matter that he handles, the thing works; the characters move and come alive; the drama acts. One of the Sonnets (150) puts it in a pointed, perhaps an overstated, form, but yet with much essential truth:

> Whence hast thou this becoming of things ill
> That in the very refuse of thy deeds
> There is such strength and warrantise of skill
> That, in my mind, thy worst all best exceeds?

He hurls his scenes down, one might think at random; they fall right; they compose; they make an image of life. As in life, good and bad are mingled in them. There is plenty in Shakespeare that is bad. There is slovenliness, disproportion, impropriety, bombast, vulgarity—one need not enlarge the catalogue. He is often barbaric. But no one has ever called him, from his best to his worst, undramatic.

It is easy to make too much of the difference, great as that is, between the crude mechanism and equip-

ment of the Elizabethan or even of the more developed Jacobean stage, and the innumerable resources of the mechanized modern theatre. All the inventions of lighting, carpentry, scenery, costume, decoration that have been poured into stage-production leave, perhaps, a fairly even balance of loss and gain. They are accessories, which if skilfully used may do a great deal to help, and if stupidly or pretentiously used may do a great deal to hinder. They hardly touch the central art of Shakespeare or its interpretation. But it is right to remember that in fact they do a good deal of what Shakespeare did—what he had to do—by the speech and movement of his actors. This gives some degree of justification for cutting down, here and there, in modern performances, a text which in Shakespeare's theatre had to be explanatory as well as dramatic. With this reservation, Shakespeare got what he wanted out of the appliances that there were. The actual Rose or Globe was his sphere of action. He made his plays for his theatre, for his actors, for his audiences: a theatre that was a mere wooden O, actors who mouthed and gagged, audiences who chattered and munched apples and took their shillingsworth. He did not really want, even if the opening chorus of *Henry V* seems to say so, 'a kingdom for a stage, princes to act and monarchs to behold.' That was a mere jet of fancy. His stage, 'this unworthy scaffold', was his kingdom. Here too it is true that the best of stage-productions are but shadows, and the worst are no worse if imagination amend them. It was, shall we say in spite of or because of these limitations? at all events under these limitations, that he made

good for all time and for all the world; that he held, and holds, the theatre of the human soul.

Turning from this to another aspect, to Shakespeare as an artist in language, we are in a thrice-eared field, where there is little new to say. But here too there is everything to study newly. The voyage of fresh discovery which each student of Shakespeare makes his own task, and his own delight, may be stimulated, and to that extent may be aided, by keeping in view some general landmarks.

When we read the plays, as literature, in their sequence, we shall more and more notice two things about this aspect of his art: first, its organic and continuous unity, and secondly, the changes which like any living organism it is undergoing. The handling of words, their phrasing and composition, the rhetorical evolution of the language, even to a large extent the actual vocabulary, and of course the metrical structure of the verse and the cadences of the prose, are all subject to this process of change. It has to be observed too, that all of them become in their turn criteria for approximate dating and placing of particular plays, as well as for a larger and more hazardous task: that of discriminating in any one play or in any portion of it, the mingled threads of earlier and later drafts, of rehandling and rewriting; of borrowings or adaptations by Shakespeare from plays by other hands, and of insertions by other hands in Shakespeare's own plays. Even beyond this, the same considerations may serve for clues, suggestions, arguments, in investigating the large and intricate question of joint authorship of a play as produced and as subsequently printed. Such joint authorship

was habitual; it was a daily practice in the output of the theatrical workshop. That it exists in a few, at least, of the plays in the Shakespeare Canon is evident and admitted. The sorting out of the mixed web, and the assignment of this or that portion to this or that author, has often been pushed into extravagance, sometimes into absurdity. But the inquiry is not one which can be ignored or swept aside. So far as it is a matter of artistry in language, of technique in style, diction, and versification, it has to be based on minute study, and such study in inexperienced hands, and not always in them only, easily loses itself among irrelevances and trivialities. A caution may not be amiss here. We are not much wiser when we have found out by elaborate calculations that the percentage of feminine-endings in *Hamlet* is the same, within 0·3, as in *Much Ado about Nothing*; or, by calculations as elaborate and more uncertain, that the percentage of run-on lines in *Romeo and Juliet*, an early play, is 14·2, in *Twelfth Night*, a middle play, 14·7, and that the percentage in *Macbeth* is nearly double that in *Othello*, two tragedies of the same late period and probably produced in two successive years. Nor can any inference be rationally drawn as to the authorship of a passage, say in *Timon of Athens* or in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, from discovering that it includes a word not occurring elsewhere in the Shakespeare Canon, but to be found in plays by Chapman or by Massinger. Such metrical and verbal calculations are mostly futile. They serve sometimes to support certain general conclusions which have been reached by a student's sense—a sense partly instinctive, partly trained—for the delicacies

of rhythm and diction, but if pursued too far they actually blunt that sense. Of the ingenuity with which these methods may be applied towards plucking out the heart of the mysteries of joint-composition and of conflation, it is needless to cite instances. But I may mention one as typical: it deals with a play in which mixed authorship is undoubted. This is the very able and scholarly essay on the origin and development of 1 *Henry VI*, published two or three years ago by Professor Gaw of the University of Southern California, in which he attempts to discriminate with confidence the work of not less than four hands, those of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Peele, and Greene. When, however, we apply such methods to the Canon, it is not amiss to remind ourselves of the fable of the lion, the cow, the she-goat, and the sheep. They joined, you will remember, in a hunting syndicate, and brought down a deer. The carcase was divided into four, and the question then arose how the portions were to be distributed. The lion spoke—I may be allowed to quote what he said in the beautiful Latin of Phaedrus as it lets me say parenthetically that this is one of the last utterances of the famous *sermo urbanus*, 'the speech of the city', in that golden age when men still 'spoke Latin at Rome':

> Ego primam tollo nomine hoc quia rex cluo:
> Secundam, quia sum consors, tribuetis mihi:
> Tum quia plus valeo, me sequetur tertia:
> Malo adficietur si quis quartam tetigerit.

'I take the first, in right of my being King. The second you will hand over to me as your partner. The third will follow me because I am the stronger. If any one touches the fourth, it will be the worse for him.'

Such exercises have their use as well as their interest for graduates specializing in Shakespearian studies at a university. But even for these, and more urgently for less advanced students of English literature, the warning must be repeated (it can hardly be repeated too often) that before entering on them a student must have saturated himself with Shakespeare, must have entered into and possessed himself of Shakespeare's world. It is only through such large and intimate acquaintance that one can reach the centre; and it is only from the central outlook that one can appreciate and discriminate the zones of corona or penumbra, as one might say, which spread away beyond the luminous core. Shakespeare's personality, and his artistry likewise, extended to and altered—let us say, Shakespearianized—in a greater or less degree all that he touched and influenced. His figure is not bounded—nothing in nature is—by a definite line; it melts into its background and surroundings. This, as with a painting, is just what makes it fully alive.

As an artist in language, the most obvious thing in Shakespeare throughout is his boundless fluency and his immense vocabulary. He never seems to have to pause for a word. At first, this wealth of language runs beyond what he has to express in it; it overflows into verbiage. In *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, where he had no limit set to him except by the printer's bill and Lord Southampton's patience, his melodious verbosity is perhaps unequalled. A theme with forty-eight variations is not unknown in the sister art of music, and both musician and poet may be allowed to have their fling. But this quality

remains in the more inert parts of his later and maturer work also; which, it is important to note, have their own dramatic value for relief and relaxation of tension.

But more and more, as the imaginative tension increases, even his swiftness of hand and amplitude of verbal resource fail to keep pace with the flood of matter that he would express. Faster than springtime showers comes thought on thought, and thought in the act of rising transforms itself into a crowd of images. He comes to express himself in a sort of verbal shorthand, 'crashing', it has been well said, 'through the forest of words like a thunderbolt, crushing them out of shape if they don't fit', and letting even the rhythms of his verse melt so as to submerge the pattern. His eloquence combines the qualities noted by Greek criticism as disparate and belonging to different types of genius, that of the flood and that of the lightning. He can make any words do anything; but he is most unapproachable when, holding all his accumulated forces in reserve, he makes half-a-dozen of the simplest and most ordinary words carry the utmost effect of exaltation and poignancy. I have incidentally cited some examples of this, and need not multiply instances. Apart from this, the technique of his earlier versification is that of his contemporaries; only he uses it (as he used everything) better than they. His later and consummate verse is his own secret, intangible and inimitable.

This is recognized, and there is no need to enlarge or insist on it. But less attention has been paid, less analysis applied, to the quality of his prose, which is,

at its best, and even habitually, also unique in its swiftness, suppleness, rhythm, and poise. A cognate subject for study, of no less interest, is the interpenetration in his hands of verse and prose. Very often, in his later and fully developed style, one cannot draw a line between his irregular verse and his cadenced prose. Prose passages and verse passages are no longer alternated in patches, sandwiched, as they were in the earlier drama when it began to seek relief from the hieratic tradition, and when the dominance of Seneca and Terence on the re-emerging art was overcome. Many passages, and even whole scenes, may be felt in either way; and it is accident, or arbitrary choice, that determines whether they shall be printed as one or the other.

Another matter of some importance is the proportion of the admixture. Only in the Histories, if *Titus Andronicus* is left out of account, is verse used throughout a play: in *Richard II*, *King John*, 1 and 3 *Henry VI*, and in *Richard III* except for the short dialogue (Act I, sc. iv) between Clarence's murderers, and even that wavers between verse and prose. No play is written wholly, or even predominantly, in prose.

It is to be observed as to this, that on the one hand the power, range, and beauty of comedy are increased by verse, while the admixture of prose gives it more freedom; and on the other hand, while only verse can carry the weight of tragedy and exalt it from the plane on which it would be merely distressing and lacerating, yet tragedy in Shakespeare's hands seeks a wider scope and a greater compass, a larger variation of tone, than can well be given under the restrictions which verse imposes.

It is idle to suppose that Shakespeare thought this out, or had theories which he proceeded to put into practice. As usual, he was guided by his sure instinct for effectiveness. That, not symmetry or finish, was his controlling motive.

It would be equally idle to look in him for what is called good taste. He had tact, which is a different thing. His taste, so far as we can judge, was pretty much that of his public; at all events, he accepted their taste as what he had to satisfy. That taste of theirs was largely both coarse and vulgar. Coarseness and vulgarity were part of life; and here too it may be said of him, in the memorable phrase of Quintilian, *omnem vitae imaginem expressit.* This also applies to the extent to which he indulges in verbal quibbles and lets off verbal fireworks. It has usually roused the sorrow, or the anger, of his critics. But there it is. Nor was he so refined as to hesitate in large use of the purple patch; which indeed, if we may judge from the play within the play in *Hamlet*, he quite simply and unaffectedly admired. Here as elsewhere, we shall think more, not less, of his art if we accept it as he gave it, as an image and interpretation of life.

A sidelight is thrown on this as well as on other aspects of Shakespeare's art by comparing it with that of other Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, and more particularly, with that of Massinger, who probably stands highest as an artist in language among the dramatists of the later generation. Study of Massinger brings great respect, and considerable admiration, for his careful construction, for his sense of dramatic values; but more particularly, for the

suavity and lucidity of his style. With him, all is well ordered, and all is neatly carried out. He knew what he meant to write, and wrote it. Thoughts, ideas, images do not come to him with a rush, he seeks for them, and his expression follows them as he brings them out. His grammar is always correct: his lines always scan: he always finishes his sentences. But our admiration remains rather tepid; we are left with the feeling that this is construction, not creation. Massinger is excellent; Shakespeare is Shakespeare.

For appreciation of Shakespeare as an artist in language, reading is essential. The impression from the stage, however vivid, is too rapid to allow of full apprehension. Reading, repeated, careful reading, and study, minute, intensive study, are needed. The immense value of Shakespeare in quotation comes of the passage quoted being isolated, and allowed to expand. I may assume a wide acquaintance with Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare*. It is amazing how the passages he quotes tell for double, because he forces us really to attend to them. That was the use of the old Beauties of Shakespeare, which are hardly mentioned but with contempt now: those extracts and selections, though liable to be abused, served a real purpose. But without such artificial aids, this is what every student must do for himself.

We may now go on, after these brief hints and suggestions, to the third factor in Shakespeare's artistry; and here we go much deeper. That is, his artistry in the treatment of his subject-matter (that subject-matter being human life) under its comic and tragic aspects; his treatment of life as a comedy, and of life as a tragedy.

Let us turn back for a moment to a winter night about two thousand years before Shakespeare began his career as a dramatist; a January or February night in Athens, after a dinner-party that had been held to celebrate the first great stage success of a young dramatist, Agathon, who was hailed as the coming man, destined perhaps to outdo both Sophocles and Euripides. Talk of wonderful brilliance went on deep into the night, until exhaustion stole over most of the company who still remained. One of them, Aristodemus, had fallen asleep. His report afterwards was this. When he woke up, towards dawn—I will now go on in the words of Plato in Jowett's English version; it is closer to the Greek, and better, than Shelley's—you will have recognized that the scene is that described in Plato's Symposium—

> 'There remained awake only Socrates, Aristophanes, and Agathon. Socrates was discoursing to them. Aristodemus did not hear the beginning of the discourse, and he was only half awake: but the chief thing he remembered was Socrates compelling the other two to acknowledge that the genius of comedy was the same as that of tragedy, and that the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also. To this they assented, being drowsy, and not quite following the argument.'

Plato himself is in his earlier writings—he hardened, if he also deepened, later—a superb dramatist with an acute sense of humour, and this little scene has quite the Shakespearian touch. But the point is this, that there are two ways of looking at and representing life. They are different; they are seemingly and superficially incompatible. One regards life, so to speak, from the outside, as something

detached and observed; the other, from the inside, as something felt and experienced. Tragedy, it is the old and sound observation of Aristotle, works through pity and terror; that is to say, through our emotions in their keenest action. Comedy is without terror, but also without pity. Each creates and displays an image of life which, inasmuch as it is partial only, is different from life itself; the two sides of the shield as we might say, or rather, the two hemispheres of a single globed world. Each requires us to enter into and accept its own angle of vision, its own atmosphere. That is part of the dramatic illusion on which the drama is founded; it is in fact the foundation of that illusion. We may call it, as we choose, the dramatic postulate, or the dramatic convention. Failure on our part in this sympathy, in this acceptance of the essential quality of the dramatized action presented to us, causes loss of contact, and even actual discomfort. So does failure on the part of the dramatist himself, or, on the stage, of his interpreters, to excite and retain this sympathy. It makes the tragic treatment seem sentimental, or as if the persons presented had lost their common sense. It makes the comic treatment seem cruel, or as if the persons presented had lost their good feeling. Or to put it otherwise: tragedy gives the awful and enigmatic quality of life; in comedy, life is not enigmatic, but inconsequent, not awful, but absurd. Neither gives a complete solution. Neither handles life as a whole. Both display and illuminate it; in their fusion, so far as fusion is possible, they present the whole of it. It is by the degree to which Shakespeare combines and interfuses them that he takes his supreme

place among artists, not only as the greatest of our tragedians and the greatest of our comedians, but as the greatest of our dramatists.

Nothing is more wonderful in Shakespeare than the immense ease, the complete control, with which he can turn from one to the other, or hover between them. He can twirl the two hemispheres between his fingers. He can, by a flick of the wrist, switch his creative power, like the language in which he embodies it, from one keyboard to the other. This holds good alike of form and substance. As we have already noticed, his verse is so elastic, his prose so musical and vibrating, that it is often matter of doubt whether a speech or a whole scene is in rhythmic prose or in liberated verse (which, by the way, is quite a different thing from *vers libre*). And similarly, the same or practically the same language may carry with it, according to the key in which it is set, the extremes of tragic awe or of radiant humour. This can best be made plain by instances. In her life of Sir Herbert Tree, Lady Tree records that, in a speech at Harvard in 1895, he gave, first Hamlet's *To be or not to be* soliloquy in the voice and manner of Falstaff, and then Falstaff's *Honour* soliloquy in the voice and manner of Hamlet. That was more than a *tour de force* to exhibit his own versatility. It was that; but it was also an illuminating criticism of Shakespeare.

To give the Hamlet soliloquy thus for the first six or seven lines would not be very difficult, though beyond that point it would. But on the other, the Falstaff soliloquy in 1 *Henry IV*, Act V, sc. i, we may pause for a moment. Falstaff's prose is perhaps the finest in Shakespeare, or in Shakespeare's age. As

is excellently observed by Stoll, 'His is in many ways the most marvellous prose ever penned. None is so heavily charged with the magnetism of a personality, or has caught so perfectly the accent and intonation of an individual human voice'. Here then is the speech, to be read as though it were spoken gravely and meditatively. In order to make it run as loose but quite Shakespearian tragic blank verse in his later manner, a very few words, only six in all, and none of them essential to the meaning, are omitted, but nothing is inserted:

'Tis not due yet; I would be loth to pay him
Before his day. What need I be so forward
With him that calls not on me?

(note the characteristically Shakespearian broken line)

Well, 'tis no matter; honour pricks me on.
But how if honour prick me off when I
Come on? how then? Can honour set a leg,
An arm, or take away the grief of a wound?
No: honour hath no skill in surgery then.
What is honour? a word: what 's that word honour?
Air. A trim reckoning. Who hath it? He
That died o' Wednesday: doth he feel it? no.
Doth he hear it? no. Is it insensible then?
Yea, to the dead; but will't not live with the living?
No. Why? Detraction will not suffer it.

But a hundred instances might be cited, and they need not be multiplied. I will only mention one or two, as typical.

Take the words wrung out of Hamlet in his self-torture, 'I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry, be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not

escape calumny': and set over against them the newly-married Mrs. Pistol's complaint: 'We cannot lodge and board a dozen or fourteen gentlewomen, that live honestly by the prick of their needles, but it will be thought we keep a bawdy-house straight.'

Lear's piteous cry:

> I am a very foolish fond old man
> Fourscore and upward . . . .
> I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion
> I would have made them skip,

is all but an exact verbal repetition—like, but ah, how different!—of the good-humoured senile babble of Shallow: 'I have lived fourscore years and upward . . . . I have seen the time, with my long sword I would have made you four tall fellows skip like rats'. And once more, if we take the light mockery of Feste at the end of *Twelfth Night*, 'thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges', and place beside it the dying words of Edmund in *King Lear*, 'The wheel is come full circle: I am here', the two lines, even the two words of the whirligig and the wheel, sum up the essence of comedy and the essence of tragedy.

It is in this handling of life as a whole that the art of Shakespeare culminates: by virtue of this he takes his place as a supreme artist, and compels a feeling, if 'on this side of idolatry', yet little short of adoration. To each new generation, to each individual, Miranda's cry of rapture comes afresh:

> O wonder!
> How many goodly creatures are there here!
> How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
> That has such people in 't!

Successive waves of idolatry and of iconoclasm have risen and fallen around him: amid them he stands secure:

—I am that I am; and they that level
At my offences, reckon up their own.

Few, except those in the outer fringe of cranks and paradox-mongers, will question the substantial justice of the tribute paid to him half a century ago by Swinburne, hyperbolical perhaps in its expression, but equally true and genuine in the feeling it expresses:

Not if men's tongues and angels' all in one
Spake, might the word be said that might speak thee.
Streams, winds, woods, flowers, fields, mountains, yea, the sea,
What power is in them all to praise the sun?
His praise is this, he can be praised of none.
Man, woman, child, praise God for him, but he
Exults not to be worshipped, but to be.
He is, and being, beholds his work well done.

There are spots on the sun: and telescope and spectroscope reveal to us that the sun itself is not a sphere of uniform splendour, but a turbulent, irregular, and agitated world, throwing itself out in vast whirls of gas and sinking into unfathomable abysses. But it remains the sun. And so after all our study of Shakespeare, and that study is endless, we shall find our track returning on itself and shall realize that we end where we began.

I have dealt in these lectures with the approach to the world of Shakespeare, and have endeavoured to make suggestions towards it. But indeed it may be called not the world merely, but the universe, of Shakespeare. The universe, as physicists inform us, is at once finite and infinite; a ray of light moving

through it, in what we call a straight line, ultimately returns to the point at which it started. They even calculate the number of millions of millions of light-years required for its journey. By a sort of analogy, the study of Shakespeare returns finally, so far as it can be completed by a single student in a single lifetime, to that assimilation of Shakespeare, that interpenetration with his world, on which I have laid stress as the foundation on which all study of him should be built. The world of Shakespeare may become our own world. We may look to end by not criticizing it or even studying it, but living in it. The evolution of studies is, like the evolution of the atom, from complex to simple. The final outcome of Shakespearian study, strictly speaking unattainable, but nevertheless approachable, is that, just as Shakespeare has no attitude towards life, so we have no attitude towards Shakespeare, but accept him. The inexhaustibility of Shakespeare is no mere paradox or metaphor; it is the basic fact which accounts for, and justifies, the inexhaustibility of those Shakespearian studies which are the province of university students.

For them as for others, the words of Johnson's Preface still hold good; 'let him that is yet unacquainted with the powers of Shakespeare, and who desires to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all the commentators'.

> This is the way to all good aventure.
> Be glad then, reader, and thy sorrow offcast;
> All open am I: pass in, and speed thee fast.

I also then will end as I began, by saying as a last word, 'Read Shakespeare'.

WITHDRAWN
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